

**Ryan Sutter**

**Hira-Hira:  
Journal of a Former  
Jehovah's Witness**

**Tasty Rerun Books**

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Dedicated to Sydney and Esther.

In loving memory of Rhett.

I love you all  
and I would choose you  
for my family again.



## READ ME FIRST!

Hi there. Thanks for checking out my book, Hira-Hira. I know a lot of people don't read "introductions" or "author's notes" so I decided to take a cue from the world of software development and have a README section at the beginning of my book.

Why did I feel the need to have such a thing at all? Quite simply to explain just what this book is that you've got in your hands (or on your screen). In order to understand how to properly read and understand this book, it might be helpful for you to have a little background on how it wound up coming into existence. As the subtitle indicates, this is basically a journal, kept by me, over the course of several years. The original content this book is based on is drawn from my blog at <http://ryansutter.net> where I have (as of this writing) just shy of 900 posts spanning about 7 years. As may be no surprise to you if you've ever kept a journal or blog, the writing covers a range of topics and exhibits a range of styles and levels of quality. Most of the posts were written on buses during commutes, in coffee shops or at my desk at work. This means that in general they are undisciplined little bits of writing and I have beyond annotating them I have tried to do only minor cleaning up. If there were punctuation and spelling errors or perhaps strange grammar, I let those things stay for the most part. I wanted to generally preserve the journal entries as written. I have removed a lot of the original entries and tried to keep entries that build a particular narrative. Because these entries were not written to tell a narrative in the first place, they may seem to jump around sometimes or may seem to include trivia that doesn't mean anything to you. Just stick with them, however, and I think you'll see how it all falls together. I hope.

Allow me to explain why I decided to take these blog entries and turn them into a book. These writings in the Internet incarnation have had a powerful (although, admittedly unintended) effect on quite a few people's lives already. My blog has helped many people move from fundamentalism to free-thought and it's been deeply satisfying to me to see that happen. I didn't write to help people, I just wrote to get things off my chest, but that is what has happened and I'm thrilled about it. Sadly, though, as time goes by and the Hira-Hira portion of my life moves further into my rear-view mirror, these posts are buried deeper and deeper in the archives of my blog. What's more, in their original form they suffered from missing information and gaps in the story, sometimes important ones, because I wasn't always up for blogging. It seemed to me that this experience and these writings could do more good by being brought together in a cohesive format, fleshed out, condensed, and turned into a book than they were doing buried in a blog archive. I hope you agree.

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## PROLOGUE

In early 1972, a pregnant, shy, 18-year-old Catholic girl named Yvonne married her cool, athletic, shaggy 20-year-old boyfriend Kevin in a big ceremony at a Catholic church in suburban Minnesota. Their baby was born a few months later, 8 weeks premature and struggling for life. He clinically died at one point, but was resuscitated. Somehow, he pulled through and after a terrifying ordeal for both parents and the baby, made it out of the incubator and into a crib. They named him Rhett Jason, the first name being chosen by Yvonne, a life-long Gone With the Wind fan.

The young family moved into a small apartment in Burnsville MN. Their next-door neighbor was a woman named Janet, who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Janet and Yvonne spoke about religion in the laundry room. Yvonne didn't believe the things Janet told her about God having a name, about the pagan origins of holidays, or about the impending Armageddon. Janet gave her a book called "The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life" and Yvonne took it with the intention of proving it wrong. She went to her mother's house and looked up the scriptures in the "Truth Book" and became convinced. The Jehovah's Witnesses were right, it was the Catholics who were wrong. God had a name and it was Jehovah it was right there in the Bible, among other things. She began studying with Janet.

Kevin was a fisherman, a partier, a drinker, a smoker, and not initially interested in his wife's new pursuit. However, he eavesdropped on the studies and was impressed by what he heard. By the time they became aware that they were pregnant again, they had both decided to commit to becoming Jehovah's Witnesses.

Fourteen short months after the birth of Rhett, as they welcomed their next child into the world, they had been baptized as Jehovah's Witnesses, stopped celebrating holidays, given up smoking, swearing and hard liquor, and started going door-to-door in the Witness ministry, distributing Watchtower and Awake magazines. They had a second son and decided to name him Ryan Kevin... that would be me.

My parents may have been new to the religion when I was born, but I didn't know that. It was just a part of our lives. As I grew up, attending meetings three times a week was just normal. It was our family routine. Going door-to-door, ringing doorbells and offering tracts almost as soon as I could walk, was just normal. When I was three, Rhett and I were joined by another brother, Reed Aaron. When I was seven we got a sister, Roberta Jael. Each of us willingly did what Witnesses do. Meetings, studying, giving talks, presenting magazines in the door-to-door ministry, listening quietly, raising our hands and answering questions from the paragraphs during the Watchtower studies, and sometimes enduring hours in hot summer cars out in the ministry. I had friends who complained to their parents about the meetings or the ministry, but none of us did. We didn't have a rebel in the bunch.

Our religion was the thing that provided the structure to our family, the pulse of our days. There was always a talk to write, or a meeting to prepare for, or a scripture to read, or doors to knock on. My mom sang in a band and my dad hunted and fished, but those were simply hobbies and we all knew it. The real

uniting force in our family was the kingdom, the last days, and the all-important ministry work.

Most of my strongest childhood memories were related to the congregation or to being a Witness. I remember how great it felt to be praised for my reading skills when I was 4 and how excited I was giving my first talk out of the book of Jeremiah when I was 5. I remember getting anise candies after the meetings from Dorothy Newland, an elderly Sister in our Kingdom Hall. I remember the time a bat got into the car when we were going out in the ministry and old Harvey and Sally Christiansen shooed it out of the passenger-side foot well. I remember the nervousness of raising my hand to answer a question from the Watchtower study (usually one word, like “Jehovah” or “Jesus”) and watching the shiny chrome microphone on the end of the pole coming down in an arc to hover in front of my mouth to amplify my answer to the whole group. I remember telling schoolmates and teachers that I didn’t celebrate Christmas, birthdays, Halloween, Easter or Thanksgiving. I remember sitting in the classroom alone when the rest of the kids were off in the gym watching “How the Grinch Stole Christmas!”. I remember being terrified of concentration camps, because I knew Witnesses had been in them in the past. I remember getting nickels, dimes and quarters from people at the doors in exchange for giving them Watchtower and Awake magazines. I remember attending an international convention in Milwaukee in 1979 where we got a special book just for kids called “My Book of Bible Stories”.

As I got older, religion and spirituality became more important to me until at age 16 I decided to get baptized and dedicate my life to Jehovah. Rhett had preceded me by one year. In October 1992, at age 19, I married my high school girlfriend Tabithah, also a Witness. We moved and began attending a new congregation where the routine I had followed my entire life continued. I operated sound and microphones during the meetings, gave talks, answered questions during studies, said prayers, attended three meetings a week and went out in the door-to-door ministry. I conducted Bible studies and also helped support a young brother in the Hall whose mother wasn’t attending the meetings regularly by giving him rides. I was very active in the congregation and happy to be so.

Then things started to get crazy.

It started when my parents separated, which was bad. Then I found out my wife was pregnant, a development we had not intended, but which was good. I finished a brief stint in technical college to learn computer programming and started working, which was also good. But because my schooling was barely adequate I was paid very little, which was bad. Our son Sydney was born, which was good. But my mom showed up at the hospital with a boyfriend we didn’t know she had, which was bad. More bad followed as my wife was diagnosed with cancer six weeks after Syd was born. During the six months of chemotherapy that followed, more bad, as my mother was officially disfellowshipped (i.e. – excommunicated) from the Jehovah’s Witnesses due to being pregnant by her boyfriend and my parents went from separated to divorced.

The soap opera continued like this, with my mom and her new husband Chris staying with us in our two-bedroom apartment when my new half-sister Jasmine was born until I kicked them out to try to focus on my just-got-done-with-chemotherapy wife and my year old son.



At this point, my wife admitted she didn't want to be a Witness anymore and, to make a long story short, decided to start dating outside our marriage. When I decided I wouldn't join her in what she was doing, told her I still believed, we wound up divorced and after a brief interlude living in my old apartment with my sister Robbie, I moved back home at 25 to regroup for a second shot at adult life.

Through it all, there were the meetings, the conventions, the assemblies, the book studies, the ministry, the magazines and the belief that Armageddon was due any day. Even with my parents divorcing, my wife leaving the religion, my marriage ending, my mother being kicked out of the religion, and the troubles of money, insurance, jobs, cancer, and everything else, I was a Witness through and through. I believed in the truth of The Truth.

My second stab at grown-up life started when I moved back out of my dad's house in late 1999 to share an apartment with a roommate named Jamin. On the big night of Y2K, I met a girl named Tricia. We dated for a few months, she broke up with me. On the rebound I got involved with a girl from Chicago nine years my junior named Amanda. In November 2000, I married her in a small ceremony in my apartment attended by my family and hers.

Four months later, still attending meetings, reading Watchtowers, praying to Jehovah and convinced of the truth of my beliefs, I started this journal...

Part 1:  
Waving In the Breeze



The curtain opens on me, Ryan Sutter, a 27 year old computer programmer and aspiring independent musician, sitting at my desk at work deciding to start an online diary to record my thoughts about my life. I was not, to put it bluntly, a happy camper. My causes of stress were many. I had divorced from my high school sweetheart and first wife Tabithah a few years prior and had married my second wife, Amanda, four months before I started the journaling. My son from my first marriage, Sydney, was six years old, I had joint custody of him with his mother. My new wife was 9 years my junior and from Illinois and she wasn't settling into either married life or Minnesota particularly well. My divorce and a recently failed dot-com business I had attempted to start in the year 2000 had left me with large debts, little cash flow, and no clue how I was going to make things work financially. Faced with the responsibilities of parenting, trying to make my new marriage work and attempting to get back on my financial feet I did what I have done my whole life, I turned to writing...

### **Tue, 27 Mar 2001: first entry**

This is my first entry. I am sitting at work, afraid to go home. I have too many responsibilities to worry about at home, not the least of which is how I am going to keep from going bankrupt. I'm writing this because, well, I've been doing this for a long time and the prospect of being able to access my diary from anywhere makes me happy. That's about all. I will probably write more tonight after my wife falls asleep.

### **Thu, 26 Apr 2001**

I was telling some stories to a guy over lunch yesterday. His name is Dan, he's a recruiter and the guy who got me into this job. Anyhow, he asked me where my songs came from. I told him about how I wrote the song Streets at 3:00 in the morning while working 3rd shift at a plastics factory on a 15 minute break. He got this look in his eye and said "Journal that. Write it down. That kind of information will be valuable to your kids in the future so that they know you." or something to that effect and that keeps going through my head here today. The things I am writing here, will they be read by my son in 20 years? I mean, this Internet stuff seems so transient. it's just a bunch of bits being sent into cyberspace, but what if it's still around when my 6 year old boy is 16? What will he think reading about what his father was thinking and doing with his life when he was 6? Or before he was born? I never thought about this diary as being a long term archive, but it really could be. I would have loved to have that kind of insight into my father. I know very little about his earlier days and I know much much less about my grandfather and nothing about my great-grandfather. It is amazing how fast people cease to exist. Maybe I need to be aware of the fact that I am sitting here typing things that might someday be all that is left of me in the world besides the children I have or may have in the

future. What will they want to know about me? I am trying to figure that out now. Maybe I'll write a diary entry specifically to Syd in the future and any grandchildren I may one day have.

### **Mon, 30 Apr 2001**

I should write something that Syd will want to read someday. Hmmmm... I know, I'll write about what just happened with my mother this weekend.

My mother and I have a complex relationship. In fact, the whole situation with her and my siblings is not only complex, it's painful. The short story (if there can really be one) is this. My mother left my father and us kids about 8 years ago. She didn't tell any of us where she was or how to reach her. She didn't mean to alienate the kids, she was just really caught up in the whole set of problems between her and my dad. At the time I was a newlywed with a kid on the way. I always wanted my mother to know and love my children if I ever had any, and so I worked hard to try to broker some sort of peace between my parents and to help my mother make something positive out of a negative situation. Naive, right? Yeah. So, anyhow, mom left and got involved with Chris (her new hubby) and got pregnant. Here's where the weirdness gets going. We come from a very strict Christian<sup>1</sup> background that was taught to us by our mother. Morality is important to all of us kids. So, the initial feelings of abandonment, combined with the betrayal of the morals she had taught us were pretty hard to take. We were still willing to forgive and accept her at that point however, despite the fact that she didn't apologize, reach out to us, acknowledge any wrongdoing on her part or make any concessions. Then, about two years ago, she started attacking our religious beliefs. Each and every time we spoke to her for about two years, she blamed the negative feelings that had developed towards her because of her actions on either our religion or our father or both. I've repeatedly asked her to keep that aspect out of it. We only live the way she taught us and the way we believe is right, but she doesn't agree with it anymore. So, for a couple years, every encounter with my mother was hard and wound up in an argument. This just further hurt all of us kids and made her feel more alienated from us. Add to this the fact that she has a daughter, Jasmine, who is my half-sister, a year younger than my son and I would love to be reconciled to her for both mine and her sakes and for the sake

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<sup>1</sup> There were several reasons I used the word Christian instead of Jehovah's Witness. First, I wouldn't have wanted to "give a bad witness" by talking about negative things and having them associated with the Witnesses. Secondly, advertising yourself as a Jehovah's Witness is a good way to turn off your reader. Thirdly, many people do not even realize that Witnesses are a Christian denomination and it's easier to just use the term they'll recognize.

of Jasmine. It just hasn't seemed possible. Now, my mom is 48 and starting to look older than I ever remember seeing her. She looks worn out. The last 8 years of fighting against her husband, then her conscience, then her children has left her beat. Still, she does weird things, crosses boundaries, fails to respect other people. For instance, she was still letting herself into my fathers home when he was gone until they finally changed the locks last year. She seems to go out of her way to make my dad's new wife Diana uncomfortable, by doing things like opening and looking through their mailbox. Oh yeah, and finally, she's started threatening suicide, having delusions that there is a massive conspiracy out to get her and basically exhibiting all sorts of symptoms of schizophrenia, depression and other mental disorders.<sup>2</sup> At this point, I don't know whether to draw her to me, hold her away or just leave it alone. Well, I could have just left it alone if it wasn't for Saturday afternoon. It was on Saturday afternoon that my mother made a surprise call on me. She showed up with Jasmine and a stack of letters addressed to me and my brothers and my sister. Technically it was one letter, Xeroxed. I read it. It was an apology, the first one I ever remember hearing from my mother for anything she has ever done wrong. When the doorbell rang I looked through the peephole and when I saw who it was considered not even opening the door, but, hey... it's my mom. I still love her. I'm just hurt and afraid of her. My wife has never even met her. Amanda didn't meet her on Saturday either because she was taking a nap and missed the whole thing. So, I gave my mom a hug and told her I would deliver the letters and then she left and I haven't been able to get the image of it out of my head. Jasmine was with her and came in the house looking for Sydney. He wasn't there, he had gone back to his mothers house until Wednesday. She was disappointed. So, now I have this stack of letters in my living room with an apology from my mother that I want to accept and want to believe and I just can't fully do either one. Boy, do I miss her...

**Wed, 01 Aug 2001**

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<sup>2</sup> My mother has never actually been diagnosed schizophrenic and, despite my suspicions that it is indeed the case, I have often wondered whether the paranoia and persecution complexes she has shown over the years were caused by illness or by the stress being a disfellowshipped Jehovah's Witness.

I have to call Chad tonight. I have to tell him that I will NOT be able to be his best man. That makes me really sad. I love Chad and it's great to see him again. I just wish things were different.<sup>3</sup>

[My little brother] Reed and Jana [got engaged]. Yeah!!!! Finally the boy has done something smart. I wonder what took him so dang long..... OK well, I am going to sign off for now. Me bum is falling asleep and I feel like resting my eyes a bit.

#### **Wed, 12 Sep 2001: september 12**

Yesterday the world was changed, probably forever, by one of the worst events to ever happen to this country. The World Trade Centers were attacked and destroyed. Nobody knows how many people were killed. Nobody knows what it will do to the economy, the national psyche or anything else. It was completely unexpected and devastating. I don't have any words for it and don't have any clue what to say. Normally, on a day like today, I would be writing about my life, about some little thing going on in it, about my money or health. I might be writing about the computer I am using<sup>4</sup> and the fact that I took the screen and keyboard from a different PB170 and put them on mine to fix it when the screen went black. I might be writing about the embarrassment of falling asleep next to a pretty girl on the bus or about any of a number of trivial things, but thousands, possibly tens of thousands, of people lost their lives yesterday and I can think of nothing else today. What am I going to tell Sydney tonight?<sup>5</sup>

#### **Sat, 20 Oct 2001: Chad's Wedding**

Yesterday I went to the wedding of my life-long best-friend Chad Leighton. Chad and I have had a very strange relationship over the last 8 years or so for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that he disassociated himself from the truth<sup>6</sup> months after being baptized<sup>7</sup>. He has been trying (on and off) to come back in the truth for years since, but has not managed it quite yet. Yesterday, he married a Catholic girl named Gina<sup>8</sup>. If you're in the truth I know

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3 I know that's cryptic, but there will be more on him in a bit.

4 A then 10-year-old Apple Powerbook 170 that I used during, this, my retro-computing phase

5 I don't remember what I told Syd that night, but I do remember being at the Kingdom Hall the night before this, on 9/11, sitting in stunned silence and shock, convinced that Jehovah was going to be bringing Armageddon any day and that we were seeing Bible prophecies about the end of the world beginning to be fulfilled. I don't know if I'd ever been more certain of The Truth or grateful to have my spiritual brothers and sisters then I was on that day.

6 This is how Jehovah's Witnesses refer to their religion, they call it "The Truth"

7 At age 17, Witnesses practice adult baptism

8 Marrying outside of The Truth was heavily frowned upon, even for a former member

what you might be thinking, "You shouldn't have contact with him, you shouldn't be there, etc...". I know. If you're just some random person reading my journal or don't understand the situation, well, I'm one of Jehovah's Witnesses and things like this are just a little more complicated than you might think.<sup>9</sup>

Anyhow, Chad asked me to be the best man in his wedding and I (obviously) couldn't do it. His best "man" was a girl he went to high school with. I was physically sick to my stomach over the situation. I wanted to be up there so badly. I've been married twice, him once, three weddings total and neither of us was ever each others best man. My weddings, my best man was Rhett, my brother. In Chad's it was that girl.

It was weird being the only non-family members who were Witnesses who were at Chad's wedding. No, not weird... sad. After the wedding we drove home, from Green Lake WI, a 4+ hour drive. We got home at nearly 4:00 in the morning. I am exhausted. I had to get up and bring Syd to Tabithah today and my brain is still barely functioning.

So, the wedding was nice but sad and reminded me that life will never be the way he and I had planned it. I have a best friend who I can never be close to the way I want to be and I never want another best friend in his place. It's Chad or nobody.

#### **Thu, 01 Nov 2001: ring my bell**

Today was one of the more stressful days in recent memory. Amanda has been having a really hard time emotionally and depression wise. I have stayed home to help her out a couple of times in the last week and it's started to cause some trouble at work. Today I came in late and missed a fire drill. The fire marshal asked my boss where I was and he didn't know. When I came in the guys back at the home office had been called and were yelling at me, my project manager was yelling at me and my department manager was yelling at me. I had a major code cut-off deadline to meet and I really just wanted to be at home taking care of Amanda. To top all of this off, it's Halloween which we don't celebrate<sup>10</sup> and I had to leave to go get Syd and take him home from

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<sup>9</sup> As a Witness I was expected to shun former members, even my mother and best friend, and for the most part I did, but I still loved them and when I'd encounter them it was always awkward and kind of disturbing

<sup>10</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate any holidays except the Memorial of Jesus' Death, similar to Easter but held on Nisan 14 of the Jewish calendar and without the rabbits



school to avoid the party. Of course, his mother had sent him to school with a robot costume for the party and I had to be the mean dad who didn't let him wear it. What was she thinking? I mean, come on, she knows that school is supposed to be neutral ground, which means he doesn't celebrate holidays at school. He really shouldn't celebrate them at her house either, but I cannot control that. So, school holiday celebrations should be off-limits but she did it anyhow. I was really angry.

Anyhow, I took Syd to Chuck E. Cheese and Target to get him some Legos. The presents and pizza were Amanda's idea and I think they were a good one. Now we're going to go hang out in the new art studio<sup>11</sup> and I am going to write and Syd is going to play with Legos and Manda is going to paint and it's going to be a good time all around.

**Mon, 06 May 2002: trying to recapture**

It seems like it's inevitable. One minute you're a kid. Childlike wonder, hours spent playing in a fantasy world that feels so incredibly real, even when it's just you alone in your backyard throwing a football up in the air to yourself to score game winning touchdown after game winning touchdown. Then, all of a sudden, you're a teenager. You're questioning everything. You can feel, just beyond your grasp, some amazing question/answer/realization that pulls you on. You are fascinated by colors, smells, physical contact, ideas, ideas and more ideas. Music, light, dark, all of it is pouring in to your mind. Your filling up areas in your soul you didn't even know you had, your learning who you are, your stretching, your growing and then... it stops. Like running headlong into a brick wall it just, stops. It doesn't stop inside you. It is stopped for you. Stopped by falling in love, stopped by getting a job, stopped by choice or accident... it doesn't matter how, that growth, that power... it stops. Then it's just you. Standing there, thinking to yourself.. "Now what?" I didn't see this coming, you say. Why don't I feel this drive to change, to explore, to evolve myself? Am I dead? Will I never be able to function like that again? Your parents and workmates and everybody else, they just say, "Yeah, that's how it is" and they go on. They accept that dreams die and reality sets in and that life is not a fairy-tale. They accept that they won't be astronauts or firemen or ballerinas or poets or painters or rock stars. But, you sit there and you look at yourself in your grown up clothes in your grown up environment and you get scared because time starts to accelerate. All those long long summers of your

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<sup>11</sup> I had recently converted our apartment garage into a studio space for Amanda

childhood... they're blips now. Months start to peel off the calendar like in some Warner Brothers cartoon, January, February, March, April, faster and faster until it's a big blur and a year is gone then two then three and then you don't even notice anymore. One day, your old. Not just a little old. A lot old. You're old and you realize that you've missed it. You've missed the whole thing. The closest you ever got to an answer was at 17. The closest you ever got to control was in your mind. And you're numb. You barely feel. You remember, vaguely, a time when all feelings were overwhelming, when you felt that your heart would burst with the passion of just being a human being on this planet. But now... it's all misty. It's recalled fondly through a haze. It's nostalgia. You remember the warm fuzzy feelings, forget the pain, miss out on what the experience really was. It seems inevitable. It really does. But it's not. Now, while you can, capture your pain, capture your joy, and keep them. Be stupid. Be over the top. Don't stop being those things. Never be full. Stay hungry. Hit 30 running. Be obsessed with life at 40. Tear into your existence with both hands. Hungry for experience, hungry for love, hungry for life, never ever quitting. When it stops, you kick it and make it start again. When you stop feeling, make yourself go crazy. Don't, please, let go. You have passion now. You'll have to work to keep it. You have drive now. You will have to work to sustain it. You're growing now, it's up to you to make that continue. It seems inevitable, but it's not.<sup>12</sup>

### **Wed, 10 Jul 2002: dogs are gross<sup>13</sup>**

Loose Knit Cinema<sup>14</sup> is at it again, James and Jennifer and Manda and I have shot footage for a new fake horror movie trailer. I have to do the video editing. I am going to try to make it look really realistic. Not like, gory or anything, but just really accurate to the style of real movie trailers. I heard that the Chicago folks<sup>15</sup> really liked "Press 1 Now" and "Strange Bedfellows"<sup>16</sup> so that is way cool. Of course, I also heard that certain of them ripped on the very Mac computers that were used to make said films... for shame for shame...

### **Thu, 11 Jul 2002: weather**

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<sup>12</sup> I used to give myself pep talks like this all the time just to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Now, not so much. I have all the energy and motivation I need. I read this by my former self and I think, "awww, poor guy, he needs a hug."

<sup>13</sup> The following post originally contained a disgusting story about our dachshund eating a book of matches and proceeding to put on a display of vomiting and pooping that was truly horrific and quite unimaginable. I've removed that part so you don't have to imagine it. You're welcome.

<sup>14</sup> When Amanda and I made short videos with our friends James and Jennifer Zimmerman, we called ourselves Loose Knit Cinema

<sup>15</sup> Amanda was from Chicago and we still had mutual friends back there

<sup>16</sup> Two other shorts we had made as LKC

It was cold when I got up this morning. I took the dog out and I was shivering and I was trying to figure out if that was better or worse than all the thick humid heat we've been having. Now that the sun has been up for a while, it's warmed up a bit more. In fact, the temperature right now is about as perfect as it is possible to get and I am really enjoying sitting here and waiting for the bus. I wish that I didn't even have to get on the bus, that I could just stay sitting here and playing on my laptop and skip work altogether but I know I cannot do that.

Anyhow, instead of any profound thoughts this morning, all I can think about is the weather...

I think it's going to be important this winter to get Amanda out of Minnesota as much as possible. The weather here could literally kill her if she has to stay too much. When it gets all cold like that her head gets so messed up. It's really terrible. Right now she has plans to go travel in England in September, either alone or with Jess and Robyn<sup>17</sup>. I think that would be great for her. Her and I are also talking about Italy in November<sup>18</sup>. The worst months, Jan-March, I think maybe she could do some road-tripping, go stay with her sister in Florida, etc.... I'll miss her, but it's the only way to keep her from descending into the same madness she did last year and the year before. I don't think we're going to be able to stay living in this state forever.

Last night I had a horrible dream that about 1/3 of the hair on my head fell out in this big nasty pattern on the top of my head that wasn't a spot but more of a big swirl. There was no way to cover it or help it. It was just BAD and I was frantically trying to fix it. Two things about myself that really bother me... glasses and thin hair. I really wish that neither one was a problem. I mean, I can use stuff to try to make my hair regrow (I did use Rogaine, and it worked, but it started to make my head itch all the time and I had to stop... that made me really sad). I can wear contacts (and I do, every once and a while). But, most people take for granted the ability to see without assistance. I haven't known that feeling since 4th grade. Most people take for granted that there is hair on their heads. I have been fighting the retreat of my hair since I was 22. I wear my hair really really short because it minimizes my hair loss. Not because I like the style. I am sick to death of it. But, there is no other style I

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<sup>17</sup> Like most plans in our life together, this never happened

<sup>18</sup> This didn't happen either, we were too broke

can have. I am stuck, looking exactly how I look right now and that is annoying.

So, some people (you know who you are, even if I don't) have found and read this journal and preferred to stay anonymous. That's cool. I don't care who reads it because, well, my personal life is not a big secret for me. I mean, yes, there are parts of it that only my wife and I know and other things that only I know, but it's not like the things I write in this journal are unfit for public consumption. So, friends, whoever, if you read this, it's completely fine by me.

I spoke to Sy<sup>19</sup> on the phone last night. He was telling me about a girl in Vancouver that he was dating and that they were pretty serious. I really hope they get married. I would love for Sy to settle down, get hitched... that would be great. I miss Sy and Chad and the other Chad and all the times we all had together back when we were all young. It's just never the same after a certain point. I've lost more friends than I ever had.

#### **Fri, 12 Jul 2002: Robbie's Getting Married Tomorrow**

Last night stunk. It was one of those nights where whatever can go wrong does. I was really annoyed all night. But, this morning, it's all gone... this morning I can only think about the fact that my little baby sister's getting married tomorrow. I have her wedding invitation on my refrigerator. It's going to be real tomorrow. Robbie will become Robbie Matsumoto. No more Roberta Jael Sutter. That is just incredible. And then, next month, Reed and Jana are going to get married and then for the first time ever, all 4 of us will be wed. No more of the Sutter kids on the market. All gone. Bye-bye. First it was me, then Rhett, then me again and now Robbie and then Reed. Oddly enough, my mother came by unannounced last night and dropped off Jasmine. All Jazz wanted to do was play on the computer. I was in such a bad mood that I let her. I hardly saw her the whole night. That didn't make me much of a brother, I know, but I was so tired... so so so tired... and everything was going so wrong. Holden<sup>20</sup> pulled down the mouse cage and it broke and the mice got out and mouse litter and food and poo got all over the living room floor. That

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<sup>19</sup> In my senior year in high school, my big brother Rhett and I formed a band with a Korean college student named Sy Park and a guitarist we knew named Chad Astleford. Since we were all Jehovah's Witnesses we called the band Purple Triangles, a nod to the fact that Witnesses were marked with purple triangles when imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps in WWII. We recorded an album called Visor Minds, which itself was a reference to our belief that the general population of the world was unable to see that we were living in the last days because Satan had clouded their minds. We broke up shortly after I graduated high school, and just before I married Tabithah.

<sup>20</sup> One of our cats

happened while I was at Wendy's to pick up a chicken sandwich for Manda. When I got back and found Manda cleaning up the mess, I helped out. It wasn't until we got done that we realized that the chicken sandwich was a hamburger and that I had to go back to Wendy's and get new food. Stupid cat. Stupid Wendy's. All I really wanted to do last night was sleep. Just sleep. Sleep lots.

Since when are my needs or wants important though? Around my house, they rate slightly above the needs and wants of inanimate objects... and not the nice inanimate objects... more like the ones we don't use. My life consists of taking care of things and people and animals and responsibilities. some days I am fine with that. Then, some days, I just don't have the energy to take care of anyone and I need to take care of myself and I cannot. If I start to fall asleep because I am exhausted, Manda will get upset with me for not 'caring enough to stay awake and pay attention' or she will tell me about something or another that needs to get done before I can sleep. Take out the dog, trash, load the dishwasher, fold laundry, whatever. She does plenty of stuff too<sup>21</sup>, but she expects my help. The thing is, I am awake every night until 12:30 or 1:00 or later (because that's how late Manda stays up). Unlike her, however, I wake up at 7:00 and go to work (after feeding the pets and taking the dog out and taking out the trash on Fridays). I don't get to sleep or rest all day. I am awake and functioning something like 18 or 19 out of every 24 hours. I get tired. Very very tired. When I reach a point where I cannot stay awake anymore, it's not because "I don't care" but because I care so much that I have worn myself out. If I could survive without sleep, I'd do it gladly, but I can't... Anyhow, my mom didn't show up to get Jazz until almost 1:30 in the morning and I was half asleep on the couch until then and then went back to bed and slept until 7:00 or so. This morning... I am tired. Very very tired.

On the good side, I had a really cool dream last night. I was running a marathon. I didn't have any previous experience running a marathon. But, I did it. In my dream I ran and ran and ran and didn't get tired. I didn't have to stop. I just kept going and it was great. It felt great. I was flying on my feet. In real-life, I would never want to run a marathon. That sounds like a horrible idea. But in my dream, I could run forever.

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<sup>21</sup> Actually, she really didn't do much, but I knew that she read this stuff and I was trying to give her the hint that she should do her part too

So now, here I am, head aching, riding the bus, getting to work way later than I wanted to because I couldn't get out of the house on time this morning to catch the earlier bus. I read a little in my ASL textbook<sup>22</sup>. Thought about reading some in my Russian textbook<sup>23</sup> (but thought better of it because my brain is not ready for Russian right now). The main questions on my mind right now are a) how early can I get to bed tonight? b) if I try really hard can I fit in a nap? c) how many licks DOES it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop? and d) do Reed, Jon or Jenn like my new album?<sup>24</sup> The answers to these and many more fascinating questions probably await somewhere in my future... but maybe not. I mean, nobody ever found out about the Tootsie Pop thing... I tried many times.. lost count and then bit the thing....

**Mon, 15 Jul 2002: can you see the real me?**

well, rob and romi did it. they got married. it was a really cute little ceremony / picnic. the bride wore blue and the groom wore a t-shirt. some people picked up on the casual vibe and came in jeans and tennis shoes (like Reed) and others (like me) came semi-casual in khakis and button-down t-shirt. still others came formally dressed, in full suits and dresses. it made for an interesting mix of people. it was really warm but quite lovely. the food was good, the company was good, overall the whole thing gets my highest marks. my favorite part of the wedding was when they finished the vows and Robbie turned around and said (to herself) "oh my goodness... wow...". I don't think anybody was supposed to catch that, but a few of us who were sitting up close did and I thought that was great. after the ceremony I was talking to Robbie and she looked at me and "can you believe I took this step?" and I said "no" and then she looked scared and I said "are you scared?" and she said "yeah, I'm scared" and she gave me a big hug. Seems like every time we hugged somebody wanted to take a picture.

My mom was there. That was really strange. She wasn't at Rhett's wedding or my second one and as far as I know she is not invited to Reeds. So, other than my first wedding (which took place before she flaked out), my mom will have missed all of her children's weddings except one. In case you're wondering, she missed mine and Rhett's and will miss Reed's because she was / is not invited. You may think that harsh and awful but you don't know my mom or

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<sup>22</sup> I was learning American Sign Language at the time to mentor a deaf intern at work

<sup>23</sup> I dabble in Russian as a hobby

<sup>24</sup> I had recently written and recorded a collection of songs in the course of a rare three day weekend away from my responsibilities and had shared copies with my brother, my friend Jon from work and my friend Jenn who I had known since high school

what she is capable of and what she has done. Robbie was only really able to invite her because it was outdoors<sup>25</sup> and she couldn't really cause much trouble.

So, after the wedding, Chad R-----<sup>26</sup> came over and we stayed up until 3:00 in the morning just talking. It was really great. I am not used to having friends like Chad around. people i can clown with and hang with and talk to who aren't your run-of-the-mill "let's go see a movie" folks. It's pretty rare that you meet people where the art of conversation can just happen. Chad is one of those guys. Manda really liked him too. I have the feeling that he's going to be around more often. Him and Nick C----- (and his wife who looks just like Kirsten Dunst) have gotta hang around more often. I think we have to invite them all over very soon.

**Mon, 15 Jul 2002: new place to eat**

I just discovered a new place to eat lunch outside today. it's a little park-like thing with a big giant red sculpture in the middle, trees, a breeze... it's great. There are giant buildings surrounding it, of course, which somewhat ruins the park-like atmosphere, but it's not bad at all.

Right now, as I write this, I am sitting in the shade of a small tree on a marble curvy bench/wall kinda thing. Sunlight filtered through leaves is falling across my screen and keyboard. It's really rather idyllic.

Thoughts in my head right now: web survey's about "if you were a \_\_\_\_\_ you would be \_\_\_\_\_" are really getting out of hand. I half expect "if you were a brand of yogurt, you would be Dannon" to be out there somewhere. Also, micro-journalism. The whole "my life as an object of news interest" phenomenon that is being driven by blogs like this one. I think it's one of the cooler things to come out of this whole Internet thing. I'm not sure what it accomplishes (besides giving future biographers TONS of accessible material and entertaining ones self and friends) but I know it's fun. I hope someday my son reads my web journal and is like "wow Dad, I feel like I know who you really are". That probably drives my journaling more than anything else.

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25 Rather than in a Kingdom Hall, the meeting place of Jehovah's Witness congregations. We concerned that our mother, who we considered to be an apostate, would use the wedding as an opportunity to promote her views that the Watchtower Society was evil and would upset the other guests

26 Yet another friend named Chad, who asked that his last name be excised from my blog

**Tue, 23 Jul 2002: if you imagine...**

If you imagine that somebody who has always shown that they love you has done you a wrong and rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt, turning the other cheek, implicitly forgiving them (all of the things Jesus would do) or talking about it you give them the cold shoulder, clam up, refuse to be warm, refuse to talk, try to make them suffer emotionally, act distant and aloof, hold a grudge... well, frankly, if you do that you are acting petty, immature, mean, shallow, selfish, obnoxious, destructive and unloving. That type of personality is just about the ugliest one there is. And that's all I've got to say about it. Don't intentionally hurt the people you supposedly love. Ever. Never, ever. Accidents happen, sure, but talk first and listen and work it out. The rest of that crap is evil and you will kill your relationships with it. Your friendships, your loves... you'll lose them all and it will be your fault.<sup>27</sup>

**Wed, 31 Jul 2002: this morning**

I got my hands on the new Kloey<sup>28</sup> album and gave it a listen. Wow. I mean... um... wow guys. It's awesome. I had heard all but the last track ("Look Up") but it is just fabulous. I can't say enough good about it.

now here I am on the stinky crappy bus back to the mall. some dork from Branson Missouri has been yelling a conversation back and forth with a UPS guy for most of the way. Another guy who looks like Otto the Bus Driver from The Simpsons asked me (for no apparent reason) if my laptop was an IBM. I told him no, it's a Mac. I still don't know why he asked. People are crammed in, standing room only. I was lucky and got on early enough to get a good seat. I wound up seated next to an unpleasant smelling elderly lady with a walker. She smells like urine. Gross.

**Mon, 05 Aug 2002: insect, algae, plant, microbe**

many years ago I wrote the following poem<sup>29</sup>:

a plane of water  
has surface tension  
and supports life  
insect  
algae

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<sup>27</sup> This is another example of me trying to communicate with Amanda via my journal. Subtle, no?

<sup>28</sup> Kloey was a band consisting of my sister Robbie, brother Reed and their friend Cindy Iverson

<sup>29</sup> Originally published in Sy Park's poetry magazine "Papier-Machete"



plant  
microbe  
and yet I have no choice  
but to plunge right through it  
it is a dimension  
I will never know

When I wrote it I think I was just trying to be profound, but I think about it fairly often and when I do it is because of my fascination with the hidden worlds all around me. There are stories in every face and whole complex lives behind every person I meet and I cannot experience those things. I can only see the surface, study from a distance, be aware of the existence without truly understanding what it is to participate. Throughout a normal day, whole universes of stories and histories and complexity walk past me everyday. The lives of the people who built the building I work in. The at-home behaviours<sup>30</sup> of the people on the bus... I tell ya, I miss out on 99.999% of the human experience... we all do. We use art and conversation and television and movies to try to see more, live more, but the truth is that only a few individuals are able to break past "community" and "family" and other institutions and go out there and experience it all. Travel the world, meet people of all kinds, fall in love and out and in it again, learn what it is to be an ocean fisherman, to be a mechanic, to be a hero, to be a villain. There aren't many Ernest Hemingway's left. LiveJournal is interesting when it comes to this because reading other people's journals gives a sort of vicarious thrill. Sort of a peek into the lives of others, without ever truly getting past the surface and into the mess. Some journals are written for the writer, some for the readers... they all tell you something about the person, but they don't tell you what it is to be in that person's life. I worry sometimes. I worry that it'll become too clean, too easy, to stay in front of a computer and experience the world as it is reported, both on the large and small scales. And then, then people will stop getting dirty, stop screwing up, stop getting out there and learning so much from so many. I mean, look at my life. I have safety, I have security. I ride a bus to work and I do my job and I ride home. I have schedule and routine. I interact with friends and family in the manner to which we have all become accustomed. I have a son and a wife. It's all good. Yet, I don't feel alive. I don't feel like I have the opportunity to learn, expand and grow. I feel like I have found a niche, a groove... a rut... in which to stay comfy forever. And it's tempting

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30 I've always been partial to British spellings of some words

while being frightening. I want to go home and fall into a comfortable bed with my wife and hang out with my son while at the same time wanting to live a messy, crazy, unstable life, roaming from place to place, from relationship to relationship, surrendering to experiences... But there are dimensions I will never know.

**Tue, 06 Aug 2002: so there I was**

Last night was really cool. I have been working with a deaf co-worker (an intern from Gallaudette University in Washington D.C.) for the last 3 months. His name is Aqil and he has been deaf since birth. In order to communicate with him, I have learned sign language. It has been an amazing experience. Aqil will be gone at the end of this week, back to school. So, I invited him over to my house to hang out, meet Syd and Manda and have some pizza last night. That was amazingly cool. I had to translate ASL for him to Syd and Manda and translate them to him and I did OK. He was over for 3 or 4 hours and then I drove him home. It's really hard having a sign language conversation while driving, you know that? Anyhow, when I brought him home to his dorm I met one of his roommates, a guy named Kevin, who is also deaf. Kevin was very excited to meet another ASL speaking person and I wound up in a long conversation with Kevin and Aqil. I had no problem just talking with them but afterwards I couldn't help but be amazed that I, who had never used sign language 6 months ago, could have a conversation with 2 deaf people at the same time and have it be normal and fairly fast moving. That was awesome. There is still one deaf worker at ECMC, a girl named Amy, but I don't work with her. So, if I want to continue learning sign I need to become friends with her or I have to meet other deaf people...

There were lots of funny moments when Aqil was over. Syd kept trying to sign to him and he actually learned a few signs. But, there was one point where they were writing back and forth to each other on a notepad and Sydney wanted to write "Yes" to something Aqil said and instead of writing the English word "Yes" he drew the ASL sign for yes (a fist moving up and down). I thought that was hilarious. Another funny moment came when I was talking to Aqil about video that ECMC made about their commitment to diversity in the workplace (they are real big on hiring the blind and deaf). Funny thing about the video... they forgot to close-caption it so deaf people could know what was going on. I mentioned that to Aqil and we all laughed... I guess he had noticed too...

In addition to the guys who are interning, there are 4 girls (Karil, Zheng, Katrina and Svetalina). I work with Karil and have become pretty good friends with her. She is also a Mac fanatic. Last night she got a new Mac G3 All-In-One, a fairly rare and pretty cool Mac that was only sold to the education market. I wanted to see it. Karil and the other girls live in the same dorm that the guys do, one floor up. So, I went up there after I left Aqil and Kevin to see her computer. I don't think her roommates were expecting to see me (just some guy from work) show up at their door at 10:30. I was looking at the computer and asking karil questions about it when it suddenly occurred to me, "Ryan, you're in a girls college dorm room with 4 girls in the middle of the night... I think it is time to head home." <sup>31</sup> So, that's what I did.

Anyhow, it's morning now. I'm at the transit station. I'm tired but I'm not sleeping. I'm just waiting for the bus and thinking about stuff. Busy little cars are whisking by, some moron with bad corporate hair is smoking to my right, the sun is peeking through the clouds in a couple spots but mostly it's bashful. I've got work to do on my Tumblr<sup>32</sup> business plan... I should get crackin'.

#### **Tue, 20 Aug 2002: my ambition has returned**

I was looking at myself in the mirror last night and a lot of the disgust I had held for myself the last few months was gone. I worked out Saturday and Sunday, last night I did sit-ups and push-ups and then showered and shaved before bed. I'm eating healthy. I've already lost 7 pounds and I can see the beginnings of a respectable stomach starting to come into view. It won't take long and I'll be feeling good. This is translating into an ability to handle my daily life. I'm more organized right now than I have been in 2 years. I've invented some good systems that work for me and I've gotten Manda on board with them. She got a job and is stable. We have a shepherding call set up with the PO at our hall in a couple of weeks<sup>33</sup>. I'm working on Tumblr and Nuclear Gopher<sup>34</sup>. Reed is getting married on Friday and the new Kloe album is getting sent into distribution. All in all, things are remarkably good.

<sup>31</sup> Besides the obvious weirdness of being a married guy in this situation, as a Jehovah's Witness it is conceivable that I could be reprimanded by the elders for such inappropriate behaviour

<sup>32</sup> The dot-com I had started in 2000 had been an early attempt at a music focused social networking site such as is very popular on the Internet today. Tumblr was my attempt at a second-generation version of that software, being developed on the side in the hopes of fixing my financial problems.

<sup>33</sup> A "shepherding call" is an in-home visit from two Elders from your congregation intended to see how you're doing, see if there is any way they can help you out with your religious activities, that sort of thing. "PO" is short for Presiding Overseer who is kind of the head Elder in the congregation, and the "hall" is referring to the Kingdom Hall, which is the Witness equivalent of a church. I had asked for this visit to help encourage Amanda and I to become more active in our congregation as our ministry work and meeting attendance were both low compared to the average.

<sup>34</sup> Nuclear Gopher was the Witness-only record label I operated along with Rhett, Reed and Robbie

Something changed and I don't know how it happened, but as hopeless as I felt 2 weeks ago is as hopeful as I feel right now. I need to hold onto this and make it stick. I need to make habits not easily broken. I need to keep this momentum going into Winter. I feel like Amanda has only now finally thawed and I'm able to flourish like that. We have to keep this up.

**Fri, 23 Aug 2002: this morning I met Campbell**

at least, I think that was his name. He was a guy hanging around the Mall of America transit station. He asked me for some money for bus fare and I gave him some of my pocket change. He then proceeded to tell me way more than I cared to know about his blind uncle and his two Rottweilers and his female problems. I was nice and conversational with him, but frankly I was relieved that he was not getting on the same bus I was. He said he was currently homeless because of "female troubles" but apparently that homelessness doesn't apply to the dogs. whatever....

So, Reed and Jana are getting married today. After today, for the first time ever, all 4 of us Sutter kids will be married. Rhett and Anna. Ryan and Amanda. Reed and Jana. Robbie and Hiromi. We've all found somebody else in the world willing to join the clan. It's the end of an era, but that's a good thing. Right?

Manda and I are in a weird place in our relationship right now. We're kind of distant from each other but we're both gaining more respect for each other in the process. It's strange, it's like we were too close emotionally, too many of our problems intertwined and we both needed a little mental space to straighten those problems out independently and some way or another we've got that space now. I'm not sure I like it. I feel the most capable and together that I've felt in a long time. I'm getting in shape, dealing with my money situation, basically taking care of all that I haven't taken care of recently. My work performance is improving, Tumblr is advancing, Nuclear Gopher is moving again (I'm helping coordinate things for the Kloey release), I've lost 7 pounds, I've finally got a plan to get out of debt, I'm on top of Syd's schooling... basically life is hitting on all cylinders right now. I've stopped daydreaming about leaving everything behind (something I would never do, but which comes to my mind when I am feelin' overwhelmed).<sup>35</sup> I've started having

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<sup>35</sup> At this time in my life there were sometimes days, weeks even, where I spent all my time fantasizing about leaving everything behind, setting up a false identity and just disappearing with whatever money I could scrape together. I went as far as researching it but never took any steps. The only reason I didn't was because it would

vivid dreams at night. I've probably not been functioning this well in over 2 years. Not probably. I haven't functioned this well in several years. The only negative I can think of right now is that I'm tired because I'm coming down sick with something. I have a sore throat and I'm sore. Other than that, everything is cool. It's just me and Manda, we're more adversarial, arguing more, not angrily but just both of us have started to say things that have been on our minds for long periods of time to each other. I think it's healthy. I think it's healthier than what we've been doing, at least I like to think so. I don't know, but I feel like we're resolving some things right now, that the nature of our relationship is changing and that it will resettle into a new pattern. I understand that this happens, it's just unsettling when it does.

I'm going to take a nap now.

**Sat, 24 Aug 2002: reed, jana and lots more**

So last night Reed and Jana got hitched. It's now official. It's the next morning and I'm sitting in my living room drinking coffee and watching Powerpuff Girls with Syd and writing in my LJ. You know, I normally hate big groups of people kinda things like last night, but I had a ton of fun yesterday (except for the wedding ceremony itself, because of all the bugs)<sup>36</sup>. It was really fun to see all those people that I hadn't seen in a long time.

Biggest surprise of the night definitely goes to Amy Barney<sup>37</sup>. I had no idea she would be there, let alone with her fiancé. That was awesome. I am really really happy for her and I wish her the best. She's a sweet girl and she deserves to be happy. It's been about 3 years since her and I broke up and I've only seen her a few times since then. So, I was surprised to see her and happy at the same time.

Amanda had a good time too. In fact, her and I even danced together to fast songs. Normally I will not set foot on the dance floor and she doesn't want me to. Last night, however, was different (maybe thanks in part to the 'special' punch that the Fowlers brought... you guys rock!). We stayed for the whole thing and at the end of the night Manda started to feel guilty that she was

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mean leaving Syd behind and I could never abandon my kid so I stuck around even when I felt like running away or killing myself.

<sup>36</sup> it was outdoors and a plague of bugs just happened to decide to descend on all the guests right in the middle of the ceremony

<sup>37</sup> A former girlfriend of mine

having so much fun and partying when a friend of hers was suffering<sup>38</sup>. We came home so she could call her, but she couldn't get a hold of her.

I still need to work out today. I'm hoping that I can get a little tennis in. I've been doing all sorts of work on my bills this morning. I think I've earned it.

One final thing... it seems to me that Carolyn Kopecky is shorter now than she used to be... She seems like a little thing now and I am used to thinking of her as being really tall... I don't get it...

**Mon, 26 Aug 2002: faith**

It's been about two weeks... or maybe this is the second week... but whatever, it's been just long enough to start to feel like routine. I'm being good, being organized, keeping all my ducks in a row, etc... Manda and I are getting along better because of it. I'm being more of the man she wants me to be and she's being more of the woman I want her to be and overall I would say that if everything between us were always the way it is right now, I would call that a success. It's very early right now. I got into work early because of stuff I have to get done before 10:00 that I'm way behind on. I wish that I had some sort of beautiful story to relate, some moving experience, some something, but as a matter of fact I do not. I simply have another day in the life, lived as well as I know how to live it. For me that's enough...

Things between Syd and Manda have not always been smooth. This weekend I got in a little spat with Manda about her role in some of the roughness. She was defensive but afterwards made an effort at the things I spoke to her about. I was really glad to have her do that. Syd may not be her son, but he is mine and the three of us have to live together in peace.

Anyhow, I have spent enough time on this for right now. I have to get working. Joy. Peace out....

**Tue, 27 Aug 2002: coors light... ewwww**

I'm sitting here in the bus enclosure thingie and I've got Rhett's song "Spiritually" going through my head. That song once received probably the most glowing review any song has ever received when some guy on MP3.com said it was the greatest song of all time. I am not sure that was correct, but in

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<sup>38</sup> One of her friends from Chicago was hospitalized at the time

my opinion it's up there. Anyhow, I'm sitting here bopping to my brothers music and several simultaneous thoughts are going through my head. First, why are there two cans of Coors Light sitting here in the bus thingie? I mean, who sits here drinking nasty beer while waiting for the bus? Not my people, that much is for sure. Second thought, how am I going to finish nucleargopher.com in the limited time available?<sup>39</sup> I only have a few more days. Guess I gotta get cracking tonight. Maybe I'll get lucky and my new scanner will arrive tonight. Third, why haven't Reed and I ever recorded together before? I suddenly had what I think is a good idea for Reed and I to record a split 7" together, playing on each others songs just to see what happens. I think that would be lots of fun. Of course, I can't ask him because he's off in St. Thomas with his wife. (Lucky punk)

So last night I was working on mixing and mastering on my solo album. I've decided that a lot of the album is going to change before it gets released on NGP. However, it will be released and it will be within 6 months. That much I know. Speaking of releases, Rhett is almost done with his new album too and the Kloey release is (of course) on September 10. Lots of music releases happening. The big question is the future of Kloey. What's going to happen with those guys is beyond me to guess. I gotta gotta assume that they'll play some shows after this CD release but whether or not there will be any more Kloey albums remains to be seen. It's probably going to be a direct result of whether or not they sell many of this one. I hate to think that it's tied to sales, but come on, the whole motivation behind NGP is to financially justify our musical hobbies (at least to the extent of paying for our equipment) or else we would just give our music away. When you have a family and kids and a job and meetings<sup>40</sup> and service<sup>41</sup> and friends, finding time to write and record music, pay for equipment, travel to gigs, etc, is both expensive and time-consuming. People outside of music generally don't seem to understand the hours and hours of work and the hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars this particular hobby takes. That money and time has to come from somewhere and, frankly, real life gets in the way after a certain point. If Kloey is not financially successful with their After-School Special, it will probably be

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<sup>39</sup> I had taken over operating the website from Reed for the first time in a couple of years. There was a CD release impending from the band Kloey and I wanted to have the site operational before the release party  
<sup>40</sup> At the time, Witnesses had three meetings a week, I understand has now been reduced to two, regardless, nearly every other night was a meeting  
<sup>41</sup> The Witness term for going door-to-door ministering to people

the end of Kloey<sup>42</sup>. It could be anyhow, but it's less likely if they sell a bunch o' copies. It's my job to help them sell 'em. I'll do my best.

I hear Reed is starting a new band. Rhett is mostly recording with Brad and Dean now (they're more his speed) making me wonder if there is any future for The Lavone<sup>43</sup> either or if we should just call it a day at Isotope<sup>44</sup>. Robbie and Hiromi are recording together, me and Manda [recording under the name] Steve the Band, Reed and Jana recorded a cover of "Close to You" for their own wedding and will keep recording together. So it seems to me that Kloey is going to be gone, [Reed's previous band] SP3 is gone, The Lavone is probably gone (though always resurrectable), [Reed's other band] DayTrip is gone and what remains is Steve, me and Rhett solo, Reed and Jana, Robbie and Hiromi and Cindy Iverson solo. It's time to breath some life into the old Gopher or else there might be no point in having a label.

I worry about NGP. It's been such a part of my life for so long and right now it's on life support. That makes me really sad. I do think, however, that life is like a game of Perfection. You get a short time to get all the little pieces into place before it all blows up on you and you have to do it all over again. Pre-2000, NGP had a bunch of pieces into place, but the timer ran out on that version, it popped up and all the pieces scattered. Now it's time to put them back again. Can I still do it? Is there any point? I think there is as long as we care about music. There is always a point...

Tue, 10 Sep 2002 13:10:00 +0000

Life is good on basically every front right now. I'm back as the top Gopher-dog, the business plan guy for Tumblr is FINALLY going to work with us (just around the time I am going to meet some VC folks, nice how that works), I have a handle on my financial situation and it's not stressing me out (it's great to have a system), we had a really encouraging shepherding call on Saturday, we're going to go watch Amelie projected on a big wall while sitting on a rooftop next Sunday, we're probably going to go see Bright Eyes play, I've lost weight and feel great, the Vikings are playing again, I've got a lot of ambition and ideas, I found my missing insurance cards... I mean, dang, it's the first time in a long time that everything has been hitting this well. Just read my

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<sup>42</sup> It was. Kloey played a few more times, but the album was their last.

<sup>43</sup> The band founded by Rhett and I sixteen years earlier

<sup>44</sup> Our last album, released in 2000



journal and you'll see. I've been down and down and down and suddenly a few weeks ago it all sort of came back.

**Wed, 11 Sep 2002: listening to K**

This morning when I got on the shuttle bus, there was this awful 9/11 tribute thing playing on the radio with snippets of George Bush talking over Enya music. I am so glad I was not a victim of that day (as are we all) but if I was I would not want my memory commemorated by Enya and GW. That is just annoying, not moving. It is really hard to believe it has been a year. I had a journal entry from 9/12 and I think I will go back and read it today, but I don't need any reminders to relive that day. It's in my brain, permanently. I will never ever forget anything about that day. Will any of us?

At work today things will be strange, with the company putting on a big push towards commemoration. I think that is nice but other than the bus being late this morning, everything is the same today as it was yesterday. I'm just glad I brought a radio to listen to today so I could drown out Enya and Bush and my laptop so I wouldn't have to think too heavily. So far Radio K<sup>45</sup> hasn't said anything about the event and I'm OK with that.

**Mon, 16 Sep 2002: air supply**

well this morning I finally did it. I finally finished the overview questionnaire for the Tumblur business plan. now it's up to summit venture strategies... does meatloaf the parrot know they're called summit?<sup>46</sup> I gotta wonder...

so, i'm really tired but this morning I got going yet again. every day, wake up, get clean, get dressed, get fed, go to work. excitement. i'm excited about a few things today though. tonight we are going to start at a new book study with the isaiah II book<sup>47</sup>. that will be nice. and maybe my new cd-burner will arrive in the mail this week. that will be nice too. man I hate Mondays...

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<sup>45</sup> Minneapolis local college radio station from the University of Minnesota

<sup>46</sup> When Rhett and I were in school, he invented a character he called "Meatloaf the Parrot", a squeaky voiced parrot who would only say the word "meatloaf". For some reason the way Meatloaf would pronounce the word it came out as meat-ne' oaf and the two of us spent hours squawking "meatloaf! meatloaf!" in the back seat of the car, annoying our parents to no end. One day Rhett decided that Meatloaf had a new word, "summit", but he used it very rarely.

<sup>47</sup> One of our three weekly Witness meetings was a book study held in a private home in which we would study various Watchtower publications for an hour. We had just finished the first of two books on the Bible book of Isaiah

when I weighed myself this morning I was down another 2 pounds. yeah for me, my fat belly and love handles are almost gone. my stomach is relatively flat. I don't know the last time I was down to 164, but it feels good.

Wednesday is a bit of a milestone. 29 years old for this kid. it's the beginning of my 365 day countdown to 30. that's such a short time and i still have so much to do... oh well, it's not like I'll die at 30 or anything, it's just that I have a timetable to keep and 30 is kind of important in my planning. I'm ahead on many things, behind on a few. Maybe I can make up the difference. I don't know...

Well, I'm getting close to my stop. I'm signing off...

**Mon, 23 Sep 2002: lotsa times...**

there are lots of times that I picture things in my head that are really terrible when I think about them rationally. I think everybody does that, mentally editing out stray thoughts and ideas and visions that we don't agree with as part of our value systems. i worry about these things perhaps more than most, however, because of the fact that my mother is quite obviously incapable anymore of separating those thoughts out. she cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. she is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia<sup>48</sup> but she will not believe it.

she called me today. every time that happens it casts a pall over my day. it makes me feel heavy and thick. it makes my nervous and sad. today she was yelling. i was lucky and she got my answering machine. she wanted me to set up a meeting with rhett and reed and robbie to "clear some things up". to give her a chance to convince us all that she is correct in her beliefs that there is a massive conspiracy involving the police and the mafia and terrorists to destroy her life. that she is the helpless victim of a highly organized and (apparently) well-financed cabal intent on doing SOMETHING TERRIBLE and focused on destroying her life. she believes her husband is being manipulated by his family into killing her. she believes that her life is in danger. she also believes that she is entirely sane and that anybody who "accuses" her of suffering from a mental illness is just trying to destroy and discredit her. well, mom, i guess i'm part of the cabal because i don't believe a word. i believe that you are ill. very, very ill. i do not believe that your husband or his family wants to kill

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<sup>48</sup> I believe, it has never been diagnosed

you. i do not believe that a conspiracy has taken place to destroy your life and career. i do not believe that people are planted in grocery stores to tempt you into incriminating yourself. there is not a single thing you say that stands up to even the most minute amount of scrutiny. you're brain is sick. it makes you believe these things. but you cannot yell at me for not fixing it for you. i have been patient. i have listened, reasoned, thought long and hard. i hate what i have to do. i have to call your husband. i have to tell him that you need to be in a hospital. i don't see any choice. i have to think of jasmine. you cannot raise a daughter like this. you just can't. you are dangerous and i don't know if i've ever been sadder about anything in my life. i love you.

i think i'm going to work on my novel now. anything, anything but this<sup>49</sup>.

#### **Mon, 30 Sep 2002: the fibonacci sequence**

Last night I had a conversation with Manda that reminded me of ones I had with my ex-wife and I didn't like it one bit. It was the conversation where she accuses me of caring more about Tumblur and Nuclear Gopher than I do about her or Sydney and wishes I would just leave them alone. Of all the people in the world, I never expected her to say that. Never. Tab used to get mad at me because I worked hard to advance my programming career. I had to work harder because I [had to skimp] on schooling<sup>50</sup>. I had to study at home because the technology was changing from client/server to Internet. She didn't understand that or want to accept it. She thought I should go to school, get a job and stay in it, that extra work or study or investment in technology was a waste of my time and money and that time I spent with those things was just stealing time from her. So, as much as I could, I managed to squeeze those things, the learning, the technology, into the cracks in my life. I filled small niches of time with reading books or working on web development. Nuclear Gopher was my practice field, my idea lab. I learned things on Nuclear Gopher and I put them on my resume. Those things are why I still have a good job today, even after some really rough patches. She never thought I could make more than a certain amount of money a year. I've more than doubled it and she now realizes that I needed to do what I did, that it wasn't "stealing time" from her, but rather, trying to do what I had to in order to provide for my family. Now, Manda is different. She encourages my artistic

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49 As of this writing, despite every attempt I have made to get my mother help or convince her husband to do so, she still remains untreated and suffering

50 As a Witness, I was discouraged from pursuing any but the most rudimentary secondary education. A four year college was not allowed and even technical college was frowned upon but could be attended if required to get a proper job. I went to 13 months of technical school for software development

pursuits, Tabithah fought against them tooth and nail ("when are you going to grow up and quit with this music stuff?"). Manda even used to support what I was doing with Tumblr, but she hasn't seen positive results yet and she's not patient enough to see it through. So, now she's starting to think it's a "dream the impossible dream" kind of thing. That it's just a waste of time and that I love it more than her. That pisses me off so badly I cannot even adequately express it. No matter how many times I say it I am never believed, but I'll say it again: I want to be independently successful so that I can have time to be with the people I love and I've felt that way since I was a teenager. It is because I love Manda and Syd that I work on these projects. I want to provide for them, I want to care for them and I want to be able to be HOME to do it. Home, with them. This system<sup>51</sup> does not easily allow that. In fact, the normal situation in this world today is that you and your wife need to be out working full-time jobs. That means a life spent away from each other for all the good hours in the day. That means a dependence on the whims of managers and bosses to keep you alive and fed. That is just sick. How can you have a healthy family life when you never see each other? I realized this long, long ago, before I got married to Tab. I thought, "There are four ways of doing things, time, luck, ingenuity and poverty. One, work hard, away from your family, for decades. Retire and spend your old age catching up on everything you missed out on, if you're still married at all and your kids don't hate you. Two, win or inherit a bunch of money and join the idle rich or at least be comfy middle class with a lot of time on your hands. Three, use your mind to develop something for yourself that allows you to make your own way without reliance on anyone. Make your own rules and priorities, be a self-made man. Four, forget about anything but the most basic subsistence living. Rely on friends and family for charity and assistance. Drive the cheapest car, work physical jobs at odd hours."

I still think I'm right about those four options. The only option that has ever interested me is #3. Ingenuity. My father is a good example of #1. He's worked at the same job for something like 30 years. He's comfortable and stable. He was always gone during the days. He's waiting for a pension. Through hard work and patience he's supported his family for years. I respect that very much, but he also has not seen much of the world (he doesn't travel, having not the freedom or the money or the inclination). He was gone often

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<sup>51</sup> Witnesses refer to the non-Witness world as the "system of things" and often say they can't wait for Jehovah to bring an end to "this wicked system of things".

enough that he missed major warning signs in his first marriage (to my mom) that lead to a divorce. (I'm not saying the divorce could have been prevented or that my dad was a workaholic, it's just the nature of being away all day every day). I don't know anybody who is an example of #2. I do have some friends who come from wealthy parents who get a lot more for a lot less effort than the rest of us, but being lucky is not something you can plan, it just happens. Then there is ingenuity, but I'll come back to that after I talk about poverty. Now, I personally think that poverty and ingenuity go well together. I would rather be broke and single while working on my projects than married with a good job. I'd actually rather be a married man [in other respects], but singleness makes the projects easier in a way and makes you hungrier. Still, poverty can be it's own end and my brother Rhett is the best example I know of it. He works harder than anybody I know, holding down multiple jobs, never sleeping, rarely seeing his wife or kid just so that they can stay afloat. They live in a tiny little apartment, drive junk cars and manage to make it somehow. He loves Jehovah very much and it was a desire to avoid materialism and worldly influence that caused him to not get an education and to work cleaning jobs instead. He was pioneering<sup>52</sup>, which is fantastic, and he never managed to develop the skills he needed to care for a family financially. So, life is hard on him. He's aging prematurely. He has to rely on Jehovah a lot<sup>53</sup>. Poverty is kind of fun when you're single, it's much harder when you have a wife and kid, because now instead of being a broke pioneer, he's just broke. Finally, ingenuity. No matter what your current situation, there must be some sort of way to think your way into a better one or become reliant on yourself altogether. When I was in middle school and thought of this stuff for the first time, I decided the thing to be for me was an inventor. I figured I would invent some great things, get them made and make my living that way. Then, as I got more artistically inclined in high school I switched focus to being a writer. I figured writers had it made. They could live anywhere, needed nothing but their own minds in order to make a living and got paid royalties for life. I still think that, but my career as a writer has not been stellar so far. I've tried fiction and can never quite get to where I want to be. It's a far more difficult craft than it seems when you are an avid reader. Non-fiction is OK and I've written portions of 6 different non-fiction books. I even got paid for the work.

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52 Pioneering is a Witness term that refers to people who commit to a certain number of hours ministering, mostly door to door, either every month or every year. When I pioneered I was what was called an Auxiliary Pioneer, committed to spend 60 hours a month in the ministry work. Rhett was a Regular Pioneer, committed to spending 1000 hours in a year in the ministry, about 20 hours a week. The ministry is entirely voluntary and when combined with three meetings a week and working some sort of job, Pioneering leaves little time left over for much else. The Watchtower Society encourages everybody who can pioneer to do so.  
53 i.e. – hope that he gets lucky breaks or financial support from others in the congregation

However, it's a tremendous amount of work and it's extremely difficult and boring. I could never do it quickly enough or well enough to quit my day job. So, being a writer is out for me<sup>54</sup>. Which leads me to Tumblr and NG. What I know about myself are the following things:

- I love music, always have. It's not hard for me to write music, like it is prose.
- I still like to invent, to solve problems, to unravel mysteries, but I have no interest in "building a better mouse trap"
- If I give up on using ingenuity to make my way through life and settle for putting in time I will lose all in my personality that attracted my wife in the first place and she will not like it and neither will I

It's not a coincidence that Manda and I met when I was self-employed, trying to solve the big riddle of how to make online indie music successful. I was happier and feeling more naturally myself than at any other point in my life. When that went away and I went back into full-time work, Manda was crushed and so was I. She has missed the guy that I was ever since. So, I've put myself back to work to get there again. If I could do it once, I can do it again, and this time without making the mistakes that ended it for me last time. I believe that. Manda has given up. She thinks that the way it is now is the way it will always be. Me, working as a software developer, going away in the morning, returning in the evening, spending a few hours together and going to sleep. And if I try to change that, she now thinks that my efforts are a waste of time. It's defeatism and I've seen it before and I just didn't expect to see it again. However, when Tabithah thought I was wasting my time with my programming stuff, I turned around and got a big raise and a new job. When she thought writing was a stupid idea, I got writing work that paid. Now it's time for me to take the things I'm best at, problem solving and music, and make something that uses those skills and is successful financially. It's the only way that she will believe in me again. I'm so freaking sick of "what have you done for me lately"...

**Thu, 24 Oct 2002: tabithah<sup>55</sup>**

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<sup>54</sup> Maybe I spoke too soon there...

<sup>55</sup> This post is non-sequential. It's a little bit of background about my first wife. I've decided to include it mainly because of the amount of Witness culture mentioned in it.

I was 15 years old. I met a girl. Her name was Tabithah. Eventually, I married her and divorced her and my life has never really been the same since. This is what happened...

When I was 15 I worked in a picture framing shop and spent my spare time recording music, writing a novel called "The Palace of Conservative Haircuts" and experimenting with art. I also obsessed over girls. I got crushes on basically every single one I ever saw. It was bad.

One day I was at an assembly cleaning<sup>56</sup>. I was working in this one section and I saw the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Dark hair, dark eyes, really exotic. That was Zondra. I went out of my way to meet her. That was the beginning really. The beginning of my life becoming a big ugly mess. While I was talking to her this other girl came up. I knew the other girl, in the sort of way that I knew any other daughter of a friend of a friend of my parents, which is not very well. That was Tabithah. Her and Zondra were about to move out together and into my hall.

i don't remember everything that happened. I know Rhett got a crush on Tabithah, I had a crush on Zondra. They were both older than me and Rhett. The two of us lived at home, they lived on their own. But, we hung out with them, played our Lavone music for them, got to know them a bit. Eventually, I got to be friends with Tabithah because I was talking to her about Zondra all the time.

One night I stayed up with Tabithah and a middle-aged friend of mine named Joe until about 4:30 in the morning. We were psychoanalyzing each other and discovering that we had a lot in common. To an alienated, misunderstood teenage introvert who wanted a girl this was a pretty big deal. I immediately dropped my Zondra crush and switched to Tabithah. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Things were difficult from the start. I was two years younger than her (16 and 18 by this time) and terribly immature. I called her, she laughed about it. Eventually, she tolerated me. Later, she fell for me, she kissed me... I had a

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<sup>56</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses have special larger meetings involving multiple congregations a few times a year. The congregations are organized into circuits and the circuits are organized into districts. A Circuit Assembly is a meeting of all the congregations in a circuit. A District Convention is a meeting of the congregations in a collection of circuits. These events are generally held in public venues if the district doesn't have its own special assembly hall. People from different congregations usually get assigned to clean these buildings before and after assemblies or conventions are held in them. In this case, we were cleaning the Mayo Civic Center in Rochester MN

girlfriend. I felt like I had conquered Everest. However, some things weren't quite right. I wasn't physically attracted to her ("that's ok, I said, physical attraction fades") and everything that we did seemed like it needed to be kept secret, like it was wrong. Eventually, things did go wrong when I was 17 and we slept with each other. I turned myself into the elders, she didn't want to, but she did too. I was reprov'd, publicly, in my congregation<sup>57</sup>. She was privately. She moved away and we started a semi-long-distance relationship.

There were so many reasons to break up. I didn't even want that badly to be with her. She tried to break up with me, multiple times, but the thought of returning to the way I felt before I had her was too much. I wouldn't let her do it. So, eventually, when I was 19 (by 4 weeks) we got married.

The first year was tough. I went to school and worked, she worked, we hardly saw each other, we had 4 cars die in 6 months, I never saw my family. Did I mention that she never liked my family? I should have noticed that and run away from it... anyhow...

The second year was good. The only good one we ever had. That was the year she was pregnant with Syd. I had finished school and started a real job, gained a little self-respect, figured out what living on my own was about. In November I became a father (after 14 hours of labor and a c-section that was nearly botched). We moved into a 3-bedroom apartment. Things seemed pretty good.

Then, she got cancer. 6 months of chemo, everything we owned put in storage while we moved in with her sister for support, my commute stretched to 1.5 hours each way every day. She got better and we found a new place, but our financial life was pretty much spiraling out of our control. I worked harder and tried to get better jobs to make up for it, but it wasn't enough. We stopped liking each other very much and were not ever sure we ever did because we didn't spend a whole lot of time together from the moment we got married.

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<sup>57</sup> This was my first experience with the Witness's judicial system, a tribunal of elders who determine punishments for violations of Witness rules. All extra-marital sex is forbidden in the Witness religion and anybody who engages in it faces potential punishment up to and including expulsion and shunning. In my case, I was "publicly reprov'd" which meant that an announcement was made from the podium during a meeting to the entire congregation that I had been guilty of some sort of wrongdoing but was repentant enough that I was only being reprov'd. Witnesses were still allowed to speak to me, but I was not allowed to give prayers in public, give talks in public, or publicly speak in the meetings in the question and answer portions. I was also not allowed to pioneer or to assist with the microphones, literature distribution or any of the other "privileges" within the congregation. This loss of "privileges" lasted for about two years and didn't end until after we had married and moved to a different congregation. It was a very humbling experience, being treated like "bad association" by everybody but nothing compared to things I experienced later on.



Then she decided she didn't agree with God if he was real and didn't believe in him for sure anyhow. She got involved with a guy at her restaurant<sup>58</sup>. She changed into a new person, re-invented herself and that person was not somebody I could like. We split up. We divorced. Now she is just a woman who I don't like at all. I don't like to see her, speak to her or be in her presence. I held her hand through cancer, fathered her child, enabled her entire current life and I have not got even one real memory of being with her. The entire thing seems like scenes from somebody else's life. I feel as if my life stopped 10 years ago and began again 5 years ago.

**Wed, 19 Feb 2003: Sydney and Dad, Waiting for the Bus**

So, here I am sitting with Sydney waiting for the bus. Sydney is eating a chocolate-covered granola bar and drinking Cherry Coke. I'm drinking a Caribou decaf. Today I was at work and I got a phone call from Amanda. She told me that Tabithah had called her and said that Sydney was not in school today. So, I called Tabithah and she said she would bring Syd to my work. I went downstairs and there they were, waiting in the parking lot. Me and Syd went back upstairs and got my coat and I finished work for the day. Then, we came down, bought some food and went to wait for the bus. I thought, "hey, I can show Sydney my journal. Now, since Syd is here, maybe Syd can add a note...

Hi! It's me, you know, the little boy Sydney? I'm a big kid now, I'm eight years old. And I go to second grade but I'm not feeling well today. I feel sick. That's why I couldn't go to school. I gone to school today but I coughed right away. So I had to take my medicine and I was waiting forever for mom to come and finally she came at lunch time, brought me to the doctor and it had my favorite N64 game. Like, all N64 games are favorite things of mine. Now, I know the computer works slow on you, but the computer that's color works fast. I got a point. My journal's [quickboy.diaryland.com](http://quickboy.diaryland.com). Bye!

Well, that's all from Sydney and me for today. I think I'll save this journal entry now and put it on the Internet when I get home. Until then...

**Fri, 21 Feb 2003: The Bachelorette**

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58 Having a spouse who doesn't believe in the religion is very difficult when you are a Witness, but is not considered adequate grounds for getting a divorce. If a Witness divorces their spouse for any reason other than infidelity, they are subject to judicial proceedings if they remarry.

Where to begin? OK, about 6 years ago I found another guy on the 'Net named Ryan Sutter. He was from Colorado and played college football. I emailed him and we kept in contact on and off for about 2 years until he was drafted into the NFL. I haven't been in touch with him since. This week I was watching The Bachelorette and lo and behold, a guy named Ryan was the final guy, in love with Trista. Unbeknownst to me, that was none other than my namesake from Colorado. I found out the next day. Now, if you search on Google for Ryan Sutter, guess who is the second person listed... Me. I'm strongly suspicious that the added attention to the name Ryan Sutter is responsible for an outage I had on NuclearGopher.com and I expect I may even receive some email for him at my old email address because it's the third thing returned in the Google search. So, Ryan and Trista, I wish you guys the best and I hope that you don't get too famous. :-)

**Fri, 30 May 2003: tickling sydney, killer bees and computer consulting**

I heard that 12000 bees invaded Minneapolis today. I guess they got rid of them. Manda said that she brought in a beekeeper and caught the queen bee and the rest of them followed. I have a job interview tomorrow in Minneapolis so I really hope that they got the bees out of there. I really don't want to get stung on my way to an interview and then wind up swelling up and falling down in pain with all sorts of stingers stuck in my butt. That would not be fun. I highly doubt that this is going to happen, however, I have never been stung before and I intend to never be stung if I can help it.

About the job... it would be a nice position. Consulting again. Ahhhhh... I miss consulting. I hate my job and my boss and I really would prefer to be a consultant again. Any how, I am sitting here with Syd on the circle chair and I'm thinking about tickling him. I'm not sure if I am going to, but he's reading this as I'm writing it and he's starting to get nervous about being tickled. I think he thinks that I might go and reach my hand over and pull his arms up and tickle his ribs until he can't stand it anymore. The funny thing is... he is right. :-) I sat here typing this and Syd read it and he still didn't get smart and get up to avoid being tickled. Now he did. But, silly kid that he is... he came back. Oh well, I guess I have to tickle him. I have no choice...

This is Ryan signing off...

**Wed, 06 Aug 2003: some people stink, some people don't**

I got on the bus today and noticed that the guy sitting in front of me had a Mac keyboard sticking out of his bag. I mentioned it and a conversation ensued. It turns out he is a neighbor of mine, lives about a block away. His name is Romeo and he's a teacher at a school in Minneapolis. He is middle aged, bald and black and a pretty nice guy. We talked until he got off the bus a couple of minutes ago. He used to teach in Rochester and had to leave because people around him were so racist. That really bugs me. Here you've got a nice, soft-spoken, hard-working man who has dedicated his life to helping kids and he gets treated badly because of the amount of pigmentation in his skin. I hate people...

**Wed, 06 Aug 2003: the great dividing range simply proves we're indivisible**

So, here I am with Sydney on the bus. We're on one of the really nice buses that's not too loud and has cool stadium seating. We're up really high and we have a foot rest. I like this bus. We're on 35W just south of 494 heading home. I don't know exactly what we're going to do tonight, but I hope it's fun.

Tiffany (Syd's babysitter) drew a picture of Sydney and it's pretty good. Sydney wrote "QUICK BOY" along the top because that's his superhero alter-ego. Me and Syd are both wearing blue right now. I have blue jeans, blue shirt, but not blue underwear. Sydney has a blue shirt AND blue underwear. Not to mention, he also has blue eyes and if you drop him from a tall building, he could get a black and blue bruise on his head. But, he doesn't have one.

It's kinda weird writing this journal entry because Sydney is watching over my shoulder and I know that someday when we're both older, like in 10 years or so, we'll look on the Internet and we'll read about ourselves. When I was a kid, I didn't have anything like this. I don't know what I did with my dad. I don't know what my dad thought about. But, Sydney can learn all about me by reading my journal. If anything ever happened to me, like if I died or went into a coma, he could still know who his dad was and that his dad loved him. I think that is pretty cool. The other cool thing is Syd's journal at <http://quickboy.diaryland.com>. His journal has almost 2 years worth of writing in it already... I think... When he's 18 he will be able to look back and watch himself grow up through his own words. That's another cool thing I wish I had when I was a kid. I have some old stuff. I have songs I recorded when I was younger than Syd. There are tapes of me singing from when I was

8. I don't know if Syd has ever heard me singing when I was 8... I should play that for him sometime.

I wish I knew more about my dad. He's still around and I can ask him, but people don't always remember stuff and I wish he had a journal so I could have read it. Oh well. Whatcha gonna do?

One cool thing to say for today... N/A<sup>59</sup> is the best hip-hop band the midwest has ever seen!!!!!!! Yeah!!!!!! OK, that's all for me. Peace out.

**Thu, 07 Aug 2003: It's time I got back and I don't even know how I got off the track**

It seems like I am constantly finding myself disconnected from the people I love and the community I am supposed to be a part of. I know that I disconnect myself, that I don't naturally find myself fitting into groups and feeling drawn to community. This includes family, friends and the congregation... all places where I have consistently had problems being consistent. A lot of people feel a void when they are alone, something they want to fill with a lot of human interaction. I can honestly say that however much I feel love for, and enjoy interacting with, other people, I rarely feel the need to do it. I am usually happiest when pursuing my own ideas and goals. I wish I was different somehow when it comes to that because I really do love my family and friends in the congregation and I feel like they don't realize how much because I just never think to reach out to them.

There are so many things to write about right now but I have to start with the discovery I made today that some of the aforementioned family and friends read this journal. I guess I kinda knew that, but I had completely let it slip my mind because I never read it. I generally write my entries disconnected from the Internet on my laptop on bus. (I used to use my trusty ancient 12 year old Powerbook 170 but I have recently moved up to a slightly newer Titanium G4 Powerbook... grin...). After writing an entry, I eventually get to an Internet connection and I publish it out onto LiveJournal. I almost never go to my journal and read it. So, if you've left comments before and I never responding to said comments, it's because I didn't know they were there. Case in point, recent comments made by Reed and Hiromi. Hey guys. Sorry I missed your remarks... but here is what I have to say... Reed, I miss you too. I want to get

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<sup>59</sup> Yet another Witness band, this one featuring my sister's husband Hiromi and Rhett's brother-in-law Eric among others

together soon. Very soon. Let's play a little Madden on the Gamecube, go fishing, drink beer, maybe record some music together. My garage is becoming my new studio and maybe we should do some work in it as soon as I get an audio interface for my TiBook... Hiromi, hiya! I didn't know you didn't know about my journal but I'm glad you found it and all that good stuff. I read yours and now you can return the favor. You and me and Rob and Manda need to see each other soon. I miss you guys too... And, no, I wouldn't have probably struck up a conversation with Romeo if he had a PC keyboard sticking out of his bag. Still, I'm not bigoted against PC users, I just gently try to steer them towards the truth. The condition of Windows-PC-itis is not irreversible.

About the bees and the job interview mentioned in a previous entry... I got the job and I'm working in downtown Minneapolis now. I'm right on Nicollet Mall across the street from Let It Be and Big Brain Comics. I went into Let It Be the other day and found Kloe and was very excited. Today I discovered that the Rock Bottom Brewery on Lasalle has free wireless Internet access so I'll probably lunch there every day from now on or at least close enough to there to leech off their Internet connection. I was there today and I wanted a Rueben but it was the one item on the menu they were out of. Grrr...

OK, so if you've ever gone and read the last two years worth of journal entries on this thing you've probably found that I have felt for years that I have lots of messes to clean up. Like my entire past is just one big oil spill and my entire present is just a huge attempt to save the baby seals and ducks of my future... (now that was some bad writing). My garage has been a metaphor for the mess for a long time and a fitting one it is because it literally is a mess filled with various things I've accumulated over the last 10 years. Photographs, a raft, lots of cables, old electric bills, candles, crayons, notebooks full of grocery lists, meeting notes<sup>60</sup>, song lyrics and stories, drawings, old furniture, divorce papers, completely unquantifiable objects that I have no recollection of purchasing, Mason Thatcher's childhood guitar<sup>61</sup>, sports equipment, books, videos, CDs, tapes, diskettes, computers, computer parts, clothes, toys, receipts, flyers from old shows I've seen, flyers from old shows I've played and lots more. I spent 8 hours cleaning in there on Monday. I found boxes that

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60 Witnesses are encouraged to take notes during the meetings, therefore I to this day have notebooks full of notes taken over the years

61 Mason was a kind elderly gentleman from my congregation who eventually died of Alzheimer's Disease. His daughter gave me his old guitar when that happened and I still have it today.

hadn't been opened in 5 years and went through their contents. I filled the trash can and three cardboard boxes and barely made a dent. I took an old mattress I've got down there and bent it into an L against the wall and covered it with pillows and blankets for Amanda to hang out on while I worked in there. Yesterday morning, I found myself drawn to the garage before work. I just wanted to be in there. It was 7:00 in the morning and I went down there and laid down on the mattress and just soaked the place up. There were piles of things everywhere, things representing who I was and things I lived through. There were guitars and other musical equipment there, in preparation for when it becomes a true studio. There was a feeling... a musty, disheveled feeling, that I had hadn't felt since I moved out of my house when I was 19. It was the feeling that my basement room had growing up. Disorganized, impractical and ridiculous but also comforting and more like a nest than a room. I just laid there for 10 minutes and felt wonderful being down in that messy garage and I realized that there are a lot of things I miss. I miss my family, my childhood, the life I grew up with (as opposed to the life I made myself). I missed seemingly random people then... like Carolyn Kopecky and Sean Gavin and Lon Helland and Chad Astleford and Rachel Ruedy... I didn't know why, but I just missed them (BTW, if anybody has Carolyn's email address and they read this, please lemme know what it is... ). I think I've needed to have my space and now I'm making it, out of my garage and the thought of that makes me very happy indeed.

Well, I'm at the bus depot. I'm going to get off the bus soon. I'll go home, get on the Internet and send this little posting out into the wires. Maybe in some small way it'll help me do a little of the connecting I need to do... And BTW Reed... I taught "Skol Vikings" to Sydney<sup>62</sup>.... hee hee hee...

#### **Fri, 08 Aug 2003: hunting**

The last time I went hunting I was 15 or 16 years old. I was raised with hunting as a way of life. I took gun safety training and got my gun safety certificate when I was in middle school. I have hunted squirrels, grouse, rabbits and pheasants but never larger animals like deer. I own two guns but don't have them at my house, a rifle and a shotgun that live in my fathers gun cabinet. I haven't hunted since I was 16, not because I haven't found the time or because I just wasn't in the mood but because of a reason I have never told

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<sup>62</sup> "Skol Vikings", the fight song of the Minnesota Vikings football team, is a song Reed hates with a passion even though he loves the team. I taught it to Syd just to annoy Reed, and the two of us still sing it any time we get the chance.

my dad or my brothers... that I started to feel that hunting was a wrong thing to do. Being raised a Witness, my dad was always trying to impress on me the beauty and wonder of Jehovah's creation. He would point out every hawk that flew by, every fox in every ditch that we drove past. Of course, then he would take me out for long walks through all this beautiful creation and proceed to kill it and when I was a teenager I started to see a contradiction there. I will always remember two specific moments that crystallized my feelings for me. The first wasn't even out hunting, but rather was fishing. Now, lots of anti-hunting people feel that fishing is just as bad but I do not. Fishing can be done "catch and release" style where you hook, land and release your fish. The fish lives and you get a little entertainment. Every great once and a while something goes wrong and a fish is unintentionally killed, but people accidentally kill small animals (mice and other pests) and insects regularly on purpose so I think that it's not that bad. But anyways, back to the story... I was fishing with my dad up north. We were fishing for rainbow trout and one of us (probably him) caught a really beautiful one. This was not "catch and release", but more like "catch and eat" fishing and I was 16 or so at the time. Anyhow, we had a cooler to put the fish in when we caught them and the cooler was supposed to be filled with water but that had been overlooked. So, we got the trout into the boat and it was flopping on the floor and my dad suddenly got sort of misty eyed and said, "Just look at that. Look at the beauty of Jehovah's creation. It really makes you think what a wonderful God we have doesn't it?" and I looked at the trout, gasping air when it really wanted water, the sun reflecting off it's lovely silver scales, the rainbow running along the length of it's body and I thought, "Yes, it is an amazing creature" and then my dad reached down with a pair of pliers that he normally used to pull hooks out of fishes mouths and tried to grab the trout by it's back fin to pick it up and toss it into the cooler. The fin ripped and the trout fell to the floor of the boat, half its fin gone. He grinned a little and said "whoops!" and reached down to grab the trout by the tail instead. I was thinking, "hey, it's beautiful, why are you mangling it?" but I couldn't get myself to say anything. This time he got a better grip and picked up the fish with the pliers in one hand and opened the cooler with the other. Instead of water in the cooler, there was about a quarter inch layer of bloody slime left over from fish on the previous day. He said, "we'll have to put some water in there later" and threw the fish in. It started to flop around, breathing old blood and slime into it's gills, covering it's beautiful markings with it and my dad turned around to keep fishing. I was sickened but he didn't see the disconnect. My second moment involved actually

hunting. I was out hunting grouse with my dad around the same age. Now, grouse are very fast birds that live in the woods. Shooting one is hard. They dart around trees and make a pretty good go of it. I had been grouse hunting before but had never shot one. On this day I was walking along the top of a ravine with trees growing on the slope going down to my left. I was alone for the moment, my dad having gone on ahead and I looked to my left and there, about 15 feet away, sitting on a branch of a tree was a grouse. He hadn't seen me, or if he had he didn't think I was a threat. The branch he was in was probably 15 feet up in the tree but thanks to the slope, he was eye level with me. I stopped walking and stood there for a moment looking at him. He was so cool, just minding his own business. On the other hand, wasn't he what I came out here for? Wouldn't my dad be impressed if I got a grouse all by myself? The problem was that I had a shotgun. They are designed to hit moving targets with lots of BB's. At close range they'll simply blow something to bits. I didn't know what to do. I lifted my gun and aimed at the bird. I could see him down the barrel of my gun, just sitting there. He still hadn't moved at all. It felt wrong, but it was what I had always been taught so I made myself pull the trigger. I didn't aim high enough so instead of just killing him, I pretty much mutilated him. I blew a hole in him so large that he couldn't even really be eaten, all the meat was wrecked. He had just been a wild animal enjoying his day and I had killed him without warning or provocation and there wasn't even a point to his death. That bothered me a lot. When my dad heard the shot and came and saw the bird he just let me know that "next time, aim higher so you can hit it in the head and not wreck the meat". I took his advice to heart, but there never was a next time.

Now I am 29 and I haven't hunted in over a decade and my feelings on the matter have not gotten weaker, but rather stronger. If I had to hunt for survival, sure I'd do it. I'm not a vegetarian or animal rights activist, but I have come to the realization that hunting is wrong for a number of reasons. For one, respect for life and God's creation. Yes, the Bible allows people to eat meat right now, but does that mean that a person should destroy God's creatures with their own hands for entertainment? If you take a life because you must to survive or eat meat as part of your diet that's a far cry from going out into the wild, finding animals in their natural habitat and ending their lives just because you enjoy doing it. I can't imagine Jesus going pheasant hunting.



Second, according to the Bible humans originally didn't eat animals<sup>63</sup>. The eating of animals is the result of imperfection and if perfection is to be restored one day, logically the return to a way of life where we don't kill would be as well. Aren't we supposed to be living like that today? Showing the same respect for life we will then?<sup>64</sup> I know I don't when I eat a steak, but I think it's worse if I slit the cows throat with my own hands because I like to do it. Finally, specifically in the case of my dad... my dad is an elder in the congregation and as such he is supposed to help give spiritual guidance to people but I am aware of others besides myself who are offended or bothered by his hunting and that limits his ability to help them. My wife is one of the other people, and she could really use all the support she can get, but she can barely be in the same room with him because she loves animals so much and cares for them so much and he kills them so often. However, she is not the only one. I have known a lot of people over the years, and know quite a few today, who were bothered, hurt, offended or stumbled by the dead animals in my dad's family room and by his hunting but nobody ever says anything to him about it. This includes me. For my entire adult life I have felt this way and have never said anything about it to him because it's such a major part of his personality that I feel like there is no way to tell him this without hurting his feelings... except... now I have to. I have to because of my son. I made a decision and that is that I not only don't want Sydney to hunt, I don't want him told about it, exposed to it or taught that it's a good thing. I want him to care about and respect life, not kill for fun. I know for a fact that my dad will teach Syd about it, would start taking him hunting as soon as he could, if I didn't say something... so I have to. It's really eating me up right now... I'm not sure how to do it. How can I tell my dad that I wish he didn't hunt anymore and that I don't want him to talk about hunting around me or my kid? How can I tell him that a core part of who he is causing me spiritual conflicts and completely offends me without offending him?

**Wed, 13 Aug 2003**

It's been really nice to be getting to meetings again. I haven't been making many for a while and I've decided to refocus and make it a priority to fix that

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<sup>63</sup> Not only that, but the Watchtower Society teaches that all animals in the world were originally vegetarian, lions, snakes, you name it, and that in the coming restoration of a paradise Earth they will all return to the Edenic condition of vegetarianism. They believe that the eating of meat was forbidden for all creation until after Noah's Flood when, strangely, while populations of animals were at their most threatened (every species on Earth down to a final breeding pair or seven at most) the prohibition was lifted and it was "get your meat on" time. God is apparently not much of a conservationist.

<sup>64</sup> The Watchtower Society does not say that people should give up eating meat to emulate the paradise, that was a personal theory of mine and I was nervous even advancing it because it could be read as "independent thinking", which is discouraged by the Society

situation. I look forward to them and I like that feeling. It's been a long time since I felt really conscious of my spiritual needs and right now I'm feeling that way in a way I haven't felt in years. It's really nice...

About the hunting thing... I had my conversation with my dad and his response was "I'm sorry you feel that way". He seemed hurt that I felt the way I did but seemed to accept it. I had to tell him that I didn't want Sydney learning about it or being exposed to it. Oddly enough, the day I wrote that journal entry my dad had taken Syd to a Game Fair (i.e. - hunting show) and I didn't even know it when I wrote that journal entry. So, Sydney had spent the day around hunting dogs, hunting equipment, shooting demonstrations and had even gotten a key chain with a bullet on it. Not a picture of a bullet, an actual .306 shell that had no powder in it. My dad gave it to him but said he wanted to check with me first to make sure it was OK. I felt sick, again, wondering why my father would think it was OK to give a bullet to an 8 year old kid as a toy and I said "I would really rather he didn't have that. I don't like bullets in my house" and then I told my dad I wanted to talk to him later. At least he thought about whether I would like that or not... We went out to Applebees and had a few beers and I screwed up the courage to tell him that I wasn't just not interested in hunting but that I was anti-hunting. You know, there is one thing that really, really sucks out of this whole thing, which is, I married a woman who is among the most hyper-sensitive people I've ever met. She is very hard for other people to get to know and get close to because she is so sensitive that people hurt her all the time without intending to or realizing it. I'm sensitive to it and still do it anyhow. The fact is though, that my dad's hunting hurts her in the sense that she can't even talk to him or be in the same room with him without thinking about it even though she tries hard not to. So, again, I have a case where my wife and my father can never be together at the same time. I'm so sick of that. And for what reason? Because my dad likes to needlessly kill animals. Grrr...

#### **Sun, 17 Aug 2003: My Adventure Flowerland**

It's about time Nuclear Gopher put together a music festival featuring all the NG folks and friends... Daytrip, Steve, Skogen, Test Mode, N/A, The Lavone, various solo Sutters, Reed's new unnamed band, maybe Off-Kilter, maybe Kloey... whoever... you know, a big show. I haven't spoken to really anybody on the previous list so don't quote me on it... After talking it over with Reed this morning he's agreed it's a good idea and we've even got a name for it, "My

Adventure Flowerland". When? I don't know... don't want to conflict with October Ridge but want to give the bands sufficient time to prepare so maybe sometime mid-winter. Where? We have a few ideas, but nothing solid yet. Who? Nobody for sure yet. So, basically, this is just an announcement that we will begin planning for the first ever Nuclear Gopher music festival, featuring as much great music as we can get together on some as yet unknown date in an as yet unknown place and it will be called My Adventure Flowerland and, well, everyone's invited. :-) This is gonna be fun...

**my adventure flowerland update**

**Mon, 18 Aug 2003 06:48:00 +0000**

Maybe it's just a case of something that's time has come but it seems that I am not the only person who has been wanting to do something like this. Reed was, not surprisingly, immediately ready to go and when I spoke to Rhett today he said he had been thinking about doing exactly this just last week. So, he was immediately in. This means there will definitely be some sort of incarnation of The Lavone performing (the first time in something like 3 years). It also appears that our good friend AUDIONERD (aka Eric Skogen) has been hoping for an event like this so he's all in too. Since the idea itself is nigh unto 24 hours old and we've already got some people who want to do it I'm happy. Rhett was thinking of an early to mid November date, although I wonder if that's too soon after October Ridge... opinions anybody? I think Daytrip are definitely in and I'm definitely going to play my second solo set of all time so let's see... Lavone, Daytrip, Eric Skogen, me, Reed... it's a start. I hope we can soon count in N/A, Kloe, The Sunshine and Test Mode... We shall see... I hope people actually want to go to this show and I hope that we get a venue of sufficient size and grooviness... I'm pretty excited. I'll have to update nucleargopher.com soon... I've never organized anything like this... fun fun fun<sup>65</sup>

**reed and jana**

**Tue, 19 Aug 2003 14:49:00 +0000**

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<sup>65</sup>Due to events that transpired, My Adventure Flowerland never got beyond the planning stages, but I was completely obsessed with it and extremely excited pretty much around the clock over the idea. I still wish it had happened.

Last night Amanda and I took Reed and Jana out to The Local for an anniversary dinner. They are quickly approaching their one year anniversary. Cool, huh? Anyhow, it was a lot of fun and I remembered once again how much I miss my brother sometimes. It's so strange how similar me and Reed are. We were both sitting on the same side of the table last night and Jana commented on how much alike we looked and acted. Reed said that these days he's been catching his own reflection in mirrors and the first thing that crosses his mind is Ryan. It's so strange. We both married women exactly the same age who both come from Chicago. Our singing voices are very similar when we go into our falsettos to the point where sometimes you can't tell who is who and our speaking voices are so similar that people can tell we're brothers just by hearing it. We're about the same height. We must have an awful lot of genes in common...

So last night we picked a tentative date for My Adventure Flowerland (yes, I will be unable to stop talking about it until well after it happens, I'm that excited) and it's looking like December 20. It's a Saturday and it's likely that we're all going to need something fun by the time it rolls around so that should be about perfect. So, I'm going to start inquiring about venues and costs. We're kind of hoping that people won't be doing too much just before the holidays in the way of weddings and other events so that getting a venue will be easier.

**nuclear gopher as phenomena<sup>66</sup>**

**Fri, 22 Aug 2003 21:30:00 +0000**

Everything that has happened so far has been as natural as breathing. When, as children, my brother Rhett and I played the records we had around the house on our Fisher-Price record player, being introduced to such wonders as The Beatles, Tommy James and the Shondells and Barry Manilow, it was just something to do. When we listened to my mom's band Cactus playing in practices or at various wedding receptions and gatherings, it seemed only natural that this would be what we would do someday. When, 23 years ago,

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<sup>66</sup>If you read any of this and think that a Jehovah's Witness-centered independent record label seems like an odd thing, you're right. I am not really aware of any thing else quite like what Nuclear Gopher was. While creativity and the making of music are not specifically condemned within the Witness organization, they are not encouraged either and many parents and elders view that kind of thing as being "worldly" and frown on it. The NG record label, when it existed, was really something different, but we never encountered resistance to what we were doing. No elders tried to squash the creativity, nobody complained but over and over again people heard about it and were surprised that something like that could happen in the Witnesses.

Rhett and I formed a band with our next-door neighbor John, built a stage out of scrap wood we found in the basement, built a drum-set out of ice cream pails and cardboard, wrote our first song and put on our first concert it just seemed like the thing to do. We didn't realize we were 6 and 7 years old respectively and that 6 and 7 year old kids don't typically start writing music and forming bands, we just did what came naturally. Similarly, each step on the way, whether it was my parents buying Rhett a real drum-set, us sticking a tape recorder in the middle of the room to record our music (we now have 20 years worth of recordings), upgrading our recording gear from a 70's era GE tape player to a home stereo to a 4-track to a PC, putting our music online, selling our tapes, then CD's... all of it has just seemed like the next logical step, the next inevitable step. I can't truly pick a spot in the last 23 years and say "This is when Nuclear Gopher started". I can pinpoint the origin of the name (early 1989), the launch of the website (Feb 1995), the move to digital recording (1998), the time-frames of the various periods of development (1982-85: Kid's stuff, 1986-88: Early Lavone Era, 1989-1992: Lavone Heyday, 1992-1995: Diversification, Sy and The Hiatus, 1996-1998: Sp3 and KloeY Take Over, 1998-2003: Expansion, contraction, expansion) but at no time can I see it as anything other than something organic that takes it's own directions. Because of all this, I never know what is coming next even if I initiate or participate in it. That's what makes Nuclear Gopher so special to me. It is an unending chaotic element, stable in it's unpredictability.

When I put NG on the web in 1995 my intent was to sell music and in so doing provide financial justification for the continued presence of music in my life. Why I felt financial justification was necessary was because I was a young married man and new father and my time was suddenly precious rather than abundant and the fact was that most of it was spent attempting to be a bread winner. If I wanted to continue to putter around with my music, the puttering better result in something. It didn't take long before I realized that making money with music on the Internet wasn't going to be any quicker or easier than making it any other way. In fact, it was probably harder and potentially a big ol' waste of my time from a financial standpoint. I was either going to have to do it out of sheer love for it or not do it at all. I told myself that what I needed was just to reinvent the music industry and in so doing I could financially justify my passions. I've worked for years on a project to try to do just that, and it's not NGP, so NGP has faltered. Music has been made and never heard. CD's have been scheduled for release and never released or released in a

manner that means that nobody has heard them. As a record label, NG has been a failure financially, critically and in just about every possible measure. However, I've only now started to realize that in a far more important way NG has succeeded completely. When I tried to reach out to strangers to sell music and make money, instead I helped enable a network of friends to get to know each others. When I tried to save my musical voice by giving it a business framework, the business framework became irrelevant and the making of music became the true justification for NG. NG isn't here to make money to support our music, our music is here to enable NG to exist to provide a topic of conversation and common interest among people from all over and I never even realized it. People I don't know know Nuclear Gopher and each other and that's so great. I mean, if music can help that happen, well... that's so much better than the reasons NG became NG in the first place. The music has always been there. The passion and interest in doing it has been there my whole life but when people come to see our show, they'll remember the music yes, but they'll also remember each other and I could never have imagined how good it would feel to somehow help that happen. If NG never makes money, never releases a hit and never accomplishes anything more than just letting us have a framework for our creativity, or if it simply helps other young musicians say, "it's OK to do this music thing" then it's a complete and total success so, I guess so far.... it is.

**basketball**

**Tue, 26 Aug 2003 02:08:00 +0000**

I have a yardstick for measuring my physical conditioning. His name is Kevin Sutter and he's my father. I play him at basketball, one on one, as my test of what kind of shape I am in. Judging by tonight, I'm not in good shape. I just got done playing my dad in a couple of games and it wasn't pretty. I got whupped 7-2 not once, but twice. It probably would have been a few more times except some kids from Ecuador down at the court wanted to play against us. My dad and I took on three of them and it wasn't pretty for them. 11-2, us. In that game I only scored once. Oh sure, I stole the ball a few times, made some decent passes and blocked a few shots, but my dad scored 10 out of 11 points against three kids less than half his age (meaning they were pretty much at the age when they're supposed to be athletic and he is at the age where he is supposed to be washed up). I just hope that I can have the kind of extended youth that my dad has. If so, I'll still be going strong, and probably be better

than I am now, 23 years from now and that's a nice thought. My dad makes me feel young. Young and out of shape. :-(<sup>67</sup>

**seeing strange things these days**

**Tue, 26 Aug 2003 06:49:00 +0000**

There I was last night, at the stoplight, Cedar and 42 in Apple Valley, bag of Wendy's in tow, when what should happen but a buck nekkid guy runs in front of my car and sprints into the Perkins parking lot. I still can't believe it happened... He was really fast... and really naked... That was just about the funniest thing I've ever seen.

I saw something else amazing tonight. For some reason, there was a tree frog out on our deck. It jumped, from the third story and just sort of coasted down into the grass. I watched him go, then I ran down, caught him and took pictures of him and then let him go. That was awesome. A flying frog and a naked man in a 24 hour period. What will happen tomorrow?

**Jehovah Creates**

**Tue, 26 Aug 2003 18:53:00 +0000**

Why is it that although Jehovah was the first creative individual and he created us in his image, there are those who oppose creative behavior in individuals in the congregation? Why? What could be more in line with with our heavenly father than creating things? Music? Writing? Poetry? Film? Would all the people who fall out of the truth who play in bands or pursue other artistic pursuits fall out as easily if their pursuits were encouraged and supported instead of viewed as strange? Would they be as quick to feel alienated and to subsequently reject what they know is right if they felt accepted? I don't think everything would be different, but I wonder. Why do we not, as an organization, celebrate creativity in ourselves as an expression of a godly quality when we refer to Him as The Creator? Can somebody provide a reasonable explanation for that?

**frozen salad**

**Wed, 27 Aug 2003 18:45:00 +0000**

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<sup>67</sup>As of this writing, at the age of 57, my dad is still going strong and whupping young hotshots at basketball down at the park on the street

When I posted my little entry about Jehovah being a creator I was sort of asking the question just to stimulate discussion and thought on the topic. I do understand why people are how they are and I accept them for being that. It got some responses though, so that was cool...

I have been finding it harder and harder these days to stay informed of current events and still retain political neutrality<sup>68</sup>. I'm not about to vote or even suggest that one party is inherently better than the other in actual practice, but... well... I hate stupidity. I hate when people make decisions that are obviously completely incorrect, against all reason, because they have some sort of secondary agenda and I hate it even worse when other people stupidly go along with the original stupidity and never question it. The current political climate<sup>69</sup> in this country is an absolutely unprecedented (in my life) exercise in stupidity, lies and deviousness that is just shocking to me. I honestly believe this has the potential to be the start of the great tribulation<sup>70</sup>. So, when I have these extremely strong feelings against the current political powers, I have to temper down any feelings that I have in favor of the alternative human politicians and pray and remember that they aren't the solution either. Political neutrality is not siding with one side or the other, it's constantly keeping the real solution in mind. That doesn't mean that you can't be made sick by the greed, arrogance, disregard for life and despicable behavior of certain current political figures.... right?

**everybody wants some...**

**Tue, 02 Sep 2003 23:22:00 +0000**

My pencil has been very busy with MAF stuff these days. Everybody says that they want to play but I only have a few confirmed acts. The for-sure-100% list consists of Eric Skogen, Daytrip, The Lavone and me. The probable list is Red Letter Day, 6 After 2 and Brian Bishop. The possible list is Steve the Band. The hoped for but silent list is The Sunshine, N/A, Pop Riveter. The I'm-not-even-gonna-try list is Kloey. I have spoken to Rick Faber about some sort of involvement and he's willing to play but I don't know anything about his band

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<sup>68</sup>The Watchtower Society teaches that Jehovah's Witnesses are supposed to stay neutral about political issues, not voting, not joining political parties, not entering into the armed services.

<sup>69</sup>Iraq War, post 9/11 fear-mongering, the Bush presidency

<sup>70</sup>Witnesses believe that they are currently living in the end times, the last days. They believe that Armageddon is coming soon but will be preceded by a time of crisis on earth so bad that without divine intervention nobody will survive it. This crisis is "the Great Tribulation".



yet and haven't heard them so I can't say much right now. I also want Ezra Moore to do something, but according to Caleb he's pretty much just playing classical guitar right now... which is sweet but won't alter the somewhat unusual nature of the current lineup. If the show were to wind up consisting of just the for-sure acts, it would be a very weird show with nary a pop hook to be found. I'd like that, but I wonder how happy the attendees would be.... I want the show to have it's strange cerebral moments but also to have it's more accessible ones. I don't intend to do anything very mainstream myself but if there were a more infectious band that needed space on the bill I'd roll my solo plans up into the Lavone set. So far, I think we need N/A, The Sunshine or Pop Riveter to make some noise or at least to say if they're in or out. When The Lavone is as poppy as you're gonna get at a show, well, I shouldn't even have to finish that sentence.... I want to be able to use my pen, to count some bands in for sure... It's like herding cats...

OK, off of the MAF stuff... on to more important things. I've recently come to realize that my feelings about my wife and marriage in general are different now than they have ever been, in a good way. Without intending to, I've always held a piece of myself in reserve in my relationships, including my first marriage to Tabithah. I always kept a mental door open to the possibility that it wouldn't last, that failure was an option. I never felt totally comfortable with the idea that I was married. It wasn't until some of that feeling started to fade away recently that I even realized it was there. I've recently, how recently I cannot say, started to realize that I am comfortable being married and that I'm comfortable with the fact that it's Amanda and that I no longer have even the lingering thought of the possibility of loving somebody else at some nebulous future time. It's not like I ever harbored outright thoughts of being divorced again, it's just, I never let myself rest 100% into the concept of being comfortably connected to another person forever. I don't know how to describe it better than that. I only know this... I know that whatever that reserve is, whatever wall was there or door was open, it's closing, melting away, breaking down. I look at Amanda and she is not Amanda Hirsch (Sutter), a girl I met and married, she is my wife. She is a permanent piece of my life and I will never need to love another woman because she is there and that makes me feel good. I've felt these things but there has always been a bit of myself I held back. No more. I tried to tell her what I was thinking, how that felt and she brightened up and told me that she had been going through the same thing recently. That she had been noticing similar feelings in herself.

We hugged and smiled and it was really one of the nicest moments I've had with her. It's strange how these things happen. I love my wife.

**Marlene**

**Wed, 03 Sep 2003 20:05:00 +0000**

On a completely unrelated note. Last night I called a Target checkout lady by her name on her name tag (Marlene). She responded by calling me Jim, trying to guess my name. I thought that was awesome. I told her my name was Ryan and we all laughed. As we left, we overheard her as she attempted to guess the next customers name without provocation. She got it wrong but Marlene still rocks.

**The End of The Lavone**

**Wed, 03 Sep 2003 23:29:00 +0000**

I've wondered for quite some time now if there is even a point to The Lavone existing as a musical entity. I love my older brother, I always have and always will. That's the only reason The Lavone still exists, because I don't want to consider the possibility that we won't write and record music together anymore. On the other hand, I have another brother, Reed, who is exactly the kind of collaborator I desire and who I have never worked with in that way. I have a sister who is also brilliant and I've never worked with her that way either. Rhett and I have been The Lavone for so long that it seems wrong to ever say that we aren't anymore, except we truly aren't anymore. We used to feed off of each others ideas, now we tolerate them. It used to be that the things I want to do onstage at MAF would be greeted with enthusiasm by Rhett and be part of our Lavone show. Now he would just say, "Hey man, that sounds crazy, go for it. Me and Brad want to play some Beach Boys and Bee Gees cover songs when you're done." Covers?<sup>71</sup> Rhett revealed the following things to me on the phone today:

- He really likes playing other peoples music and is thinking about joining SRO (a local Witness wedding band that plays stuff like "The Wind Beneath My Wings" made up of a core that hasn't changed in 23 years)

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<sup>71</sup>The Lavone started off doing very experimental music and over the years we recorded ambient, rock, noise, jazz, comedy, psychedelica, baroque pop, acapella and almost every kind of music. The one thing we almost never did was play cover songs.

- No matter how hard he tries, he cannot fathom why anybody listens to Radiohead. He thinks they sound like "a guy whining over a bunch of noise" and that they have no artistic merit

- He actually wants to play Bee Gees and Beach Boys cover songs at MAF "after all the weird bands are done"<sup>72</sup>

I'm not offended, dismayed or upset... I'm simply puzzled because I don't understand what this means. My brother used to be passionate about putting his soul on tape. Now he wants to tape soul music. He used to experiment and explore music/noise by Captain Beefheart, The Plastic Ono Band, Pink Floyd, The Moody Blues, Frank Zappa, The Grateful Dead and loads of others. Now he only cares to listen to Brian Wilson, The Beach Boys, Dusty Springfield, Marvin Gaye... and I'm not saying that is bad music, it's not, but it's so so so so so so far musically from anything that is even remotely interesting to me. I can name song after song of Rhett's that has inspired and moved me as an artist, music that made me grow:

- Lying on Our Backs
- Psychedelic Kiss
- Hello, My Name Is Rhett Sutter
- Gypsy
- Gossip Gossip Gossip
- Feel
- Black
- Everybody's Building Walls
- Oh No
- Spiritually
- Inside Sally's Brain
- Love Could Be So High

I could go on and on and on... but none of those songs have been recorded in the last 10 years. I like his newer music, for the most part. Blues Around My Soul is awesome, as is Floatin' but I can't connect with songs like This Road We're On or Sweetie and even that stuff is 3+ years old now. I guess what I am saying is that Rhett has been musical hero for so long, I've followed his lead for so long, that I'm afraid to admit to myself that he's no longer going where I

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<sup>72</sup>At the time I thought of The Lavone as one of the weird bands, so that made no sense to me

want to be. Is it really possible to be a two person band where one of you wants to experiment with new sounds and the other one wants to closely emulate the music of people who died 20 years ago? Will anybody want to listen to a CD that has slick "white soul" tracks followed by (and following) experimental acoustic electronic music? Worse yet, how are we supposed to work together enthusiastically when neither of us can understand the other ones music in the least?<sup>73</sup>

It would impossible to call any band that doesn't have me and Rhett in it "The Lavone". If Rhett does his thing with his other friends and records solo stuff, that is fine but it won't be The Lavone. If I form a new band or record solo material, that's not The Lavone either and if The Lavone doesn't play together or record together, is it really a band? What I'm getting at is... should MAF be the last appearance of The Lavone? Is it all over? I kind of think so... I think the time may have come and wow, that makes me sad....

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After writing the above I called Rhett and talked to him about it and we've decided something. While The Lavone can never technically go away as long as he and I are alive, we're hanging it up after MAF. At MAF, we're going to wrap the last 17 years up in a nice little bow, say thanks for the memories and ride off into the sunset. This doesn't mean that we won't continue to make music individually, but Rhett will work with Brad and Bruce on his music and I will work solo and with Amanda in "Steve". If he needs my skills for a song, I'll record with him and vice-versa, but we won't plan Lavone gigs, won't record Lavone albums and won't actively try to function as The Lavone. So, it's the end of an era. The Legendary Lavone, 1986-2003. I used to think that could never happen and yes, it makes me very sad. So, we'll give ourselves one last hurrah at MAF and then call it a day. For those who care, we leave the following albums behind:

Psychotrauma (1986) - double-length

The Lavone Plays Live for Chad and Bobby (1987) - LP

One (1987) - double-length

We Don't Exist (1988) - double-length

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<sup>73</sup>My favorite band at the time was Radiohead and Rhett told me one day that he didn't like them at all and couldn't understand why anybody else did. We had developed a gulf in our musical tastes that just seemed to be growing wider

Lavone (1988) - LP  
Nukenlodgetisenberry (1989) - double-length  
Earth Mother (1989) - LP  
Angel of Purpose (1989) - LP  
Psychotic Requiem (1989) - EP  
A Spectacle for Compassionate Minds (1990) - double length  
Escapist Flowers (1990) - LP  
Purpose (1990) - LP, rarities and oddities collection  
A Concert for No-one (1991) - double-length  
Purpose II (1992) - LP, more of the same  
Some Enchanted Evening (1993) - LP  
The Hiatus (1999) - CD  
Isotope (2000) - CD  
The Lavone Live at The Depot (2001) - CD, unreleased because of audio problems

I know that the majority of the NG fans out there have never heard 99% of this music. I may try to change that later, put together a retrospective CD, but for now I'm just glad we did it. Bye bye Lavone...

**I won't come with you to the sesame street hall of fame**

**Thu, 04 Sep 2003 23:38:00 +0000**

So Rhett and I were talking about the set list for MAF and we've pretty much decided to play nothing that anybody will have heard before. Specifically, we've already chosen a song off Psychotrauma (1986), a couple from We Don't Exist (1988) lots of stuff from '89-93, most of which we haven't played since we recorded the songs in the first place. That's going to rock. Isotope and The Hiatus are probably going to be ignored since we played a lot of those songs at our gigs in 2000. I'm excited about that. No, I don't like nostalgia, but I do like the idea of celebrating all the stuff we worked so hard on all alone for all those years. Nobody ever knew what we were doing except us so bringing this stuff out for the first time is going to be exciting for me. Hee hee hee...

**dreaming of armageddon**

**Fri, 05 Sep 2003 14:23:00 +0000**

I used to have dreams about Armageddon<sup>74</sup> on a fairly regular basis. One time I dreamed that the clouds turned into white marble, cracked apart and fell from the sky in chunks destroying the buildings and people who were not meant to survive Armageddon. Another time I dreamed that a massive wall of fire with no visible top or beginning or end was advancing down the street in my neighborhood and as I watched it destroying everything in its path I realized it was advancing on my sister. Suddenly, a protective bubble of blue calming energy enveloped her and the wall engulfed her. It was approaching me next and again, a bubble of energy covered me and I was engulfed, but passed through unharmed. My sister and others were on the other side of the wall, staring at the devastated landscape and in awe at being delivered.

I hadn't dreamed of Armageddon for a long time until last night. Last night I had probably my strangest Armageddon dream yet in which the whole world went haywire. Clouds formed on the ground and shot lightning into the sky, hordes of people took to the streets, everything lost cohesion in civilization. I was separated from my wife and my son and I ran through the streets looking for them. I came to a house that was apparently supposed to be mine and inside, Sydney was in his underwear, scared and huddled in the corner. The windows were broken and there was dirty rainwater on the floor. I went and held him and then, suddenly, we were being transported to another place. It was still Earth, just another place on Earth, a haven for the ones who were going to survive. It was a valley and everybody that I knew was there. Even some that were not Witnesses but had loved Jehovah were there. We still had our technology, phones, etc that we had before we were moved but they had been changed. For instance, my cell phone was no longer itself. It now had un-numbered buttons on it, each button wired directly to talk to a family member I was missing. I saw a button for Amanda and pressed it and found that she was on the other end of the valley and was OK. She was going to come to me. While I waited with Sydney for Amanda and looked at all the others who were there I wondered what was going on outside the valley. What would it be like when we could leave? Where would we go now? I didn't feel frightened by the questions though, just in awe. I was grateful that Jehovah had allowed me and my family to make it through his day.

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<sup>74</sup>In the Witness view, Armageddon was to be the war of Jehovah against the wicked people and institutions of the world. Nearly everybody would die in this war. I long believed it was a somewhat disturbing concept but I absolutely believed it was inevitable and I just hoped that I would be among those who were protected during the carnage.

I don't know at all what Armageddon will be like, but I know that when I dream about it I feel what it would feel like to be shepherded through a terrible catastrophe, feeling safe the whole time.

**another call to the mental health center**

**Wed, 10 Sep 2003 23:10:00 +0000**

I had more weirdness with my mom today when she called Robbie's cell and left some sort of message saying that she had heard that her kids were bad-mouthing her. I didn't call my mom, I called Robbie and we talked about mom being insane and what we could do about it. Once again I was face to face with the fact that my mother is suffering from a mental illness and thinks that she is being persecuted by a massive conspiracy and there is little to nothing I can do about it. I called Hennepin County Mental Health and spoke to a triage nurse. She let me know the options, but they were things I already knew and I didn't really feel better. It's not the first time I've made a call like that. I can call Child Protection Services and they can evaluate my mother to determine if she is a paranoid schizophrenic and if she poses a threat to her daughter. Most likely they will say yes to the first question, but who knows about the second. Worse mothers exist. At least she doesn't beat or neglect Jasmine. She raises her strangely but feeds her and clothes her. Growing up in an odd situation is not illegal or none of the people I know would exist. Anyhow, if they said no to the first part, determined that my mother was sane, she would hate us all and consider it proof that all her conspiracy theories were true. If she was nuts, then she would hate us all and consider it proof that the conspiracy had gotten to the doctors. There is no good solution except for her to voluntarily submit herself for evaluation and graciously accept the results... and this solution is impossible. So, I make phone calls like the one I made today and hope for an answer someday. I really hate this...

**the weekend**

**Mon, 15 Sep 2003 14:34:00 +0000**

Sunday was cool. Meeting in the morning, apple and raspberry picking in the afternoon, Vikings beating the Bears in the evening. Some days life is good. That's probably why I woke up so early. I had a great day and I just wanted to see what the next one was going to be like instead of sleeping. Now I'm off to work. Ciao...

**people standing on street corners screaming**

**Thu, 18 Sep 2003 14:06:00 +0000<sup>75</sup>**

Yesterday over lunch I was walking down Nicollet Mall absorbing the sights, smells and (most importantly) the sounds. There are always street musicians out playing and the usual sounds of a bunch of people milling about but yesterday there was a special treat. On the corner of 8th and Nicollet, right in front of some big office building there was an old black man playing Eleanor Rigby on saxophone and some doughy white guy with a moustache and sneakers yelling at the top of his lungs about "accepting Jesus as your savior before it's too late"<sup>76</sup>. Now, I'm certain that the two were not together. They had never met before, most likely, and if I were sax man I would want Jesus man to get off my street corner, but together it almost seemed like a piece of performance art. The traffic sounds, hum of voices, a crying saxophone ("ahhh, look at all the lonely people...") and a hoarse voice calling out into the wilderness... It was so amazing that I immediately ran into Walgreens to try to buy a portable tape recorder to capture it on tape. As I was about to buy it, I got a phone call on my cell from Manda and decided against it because some moments just aren't the same on tape. It was something that it was good to be there for.

**october ridge<sup>77</sup>**

**Wed, 08 Oct 2003 23:31:00 +0000**

So, reading everybody's thoughts<sup>78</sup> on OR I just felt compelled to add my own. First off, it was nice to see Josh again. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen Mr. Paro, but it seemed like a really long time and he seemed as happy to see me as I was him. That was one nice thing about the day/night. The bands were good. I was especially enamored of Pop Riveter (holy shades of the old SP3 days Batman!) and Bison Teen Empire. I have asked BTE to play at MAF and they said OK so I gotta get an ETA ASAP so everyone can RSVP PDQ. I

<sup>75</sup>This post was made on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday but I neither celebrated it nor mentioned it in the post. Witnesses don't celebrate birthdays, for one thing, and I didn't want to turn 30, for another, so I ignored it.

<sup>76</sup>Even Witnesses, who go door to door "witnessing" find street preachers annoying. Ineffective too. I think there is a little professional ministerial attitude present there. I know when I saw other people trying to spread their religions I thought to myself, "No no no, let me show you how to do that properly..."

<sup>77</sup>October Ridge is the name of the homestead where my friend Josh used to organize a big annual Witness music festival. Everybody was invited, elders were present to make sure nobody was having sex or drinking, and Witness bands from all over the state and surrounding states would make their way to October Ridge to play their music. Afterwards, there was a lot of posting on various on my Witness friends' LiveJournal pages about the event.

<sup>78</sup>Referring to posts from my other LiveJournal friends, all of whom were Witnesses and most of whom were at October Ridge



love David Martin. Not in an eros kinda way, but more of a "that is one cool guy" kinda way. Plus, those guys know how to rock. Then there is Pop Riveter... They weren't perfect. They had rough patches, but it was like watching somebody fire up an old Triumph GT6 that's in the middle of a restoration. The body panels are bare, wanting paint, the interior is bare, wanting trim, but the beast just hunkers down on it's wheels and when you start the engine and hear the rumble, unsteady though it is, you can just imagine how great it's going to be when it's get polished. The Triumph runs three great laps to blow the cobwebs out, the sound tears through you and you just know... you can see what it's gonna be... It could be Reed's best band yet... I liked the enthusiasm shown by Red Letter Day. They're on the right track and I enjoyed their set. I wished Rob and 'Romi had found a little more time to practice, not because I thought they were bad but because I sensed from Robbie that she wasn't happy with their performance. I gotta admit, it wasn't great intuition on my part. I think her exact words were "we totally sucked". Sorry Rob. You'll knock 'em dead next time, I know it.

And Sydney... well, I hear and see him all the time but he still cracked me up. I grew up watching my mom on stage, Syd's growing up with a mic in hand... what will it do to him? The musical highlight of the night for me was when Josh and Eric got up and suddenly took us all in to King Crimson land. That was, well, unexpected to say the least. Polyrhythmic drum and bass jazz music? Couldn't say I saw it comin' but I will say I loved every second of it. I could have listened to them for another hour and been enthralled. I had no idea Josh had such skillz.... Finally we get to Daytrip, the coolest band that I still can't believe is popular. Daytrip does nothing that seems would have a wide appeal and they have a massive appeal. They make you feel good, or bad, but they make you feel. I can't say anything about Daytrip except that they're fabulous and I loved their set and I'm thrilled for Mr. Chad R---- that he gets to live out his rock n' roll fantasy by playin' the bass for 'em.

Speaking of Mr. R----, I am to be attending a concert<sup>79</sup> with him tonight. Looking forward to it big time.

livejournal

Thu, 09 Oct 2003 23:57:00 +0000

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<sup>79</sup> We saw Ida play at an art museum on the University of MN east bank. We ran into my sister Robbie and her husband Hiromi at the show as well

Today I was looking for some interesting reading and so I opened about 15 tabs on my web browser and loaded a random LJ page into each one. I spent the better part of an hour reading the random thoughts of strangers and I have one major observation to make about the experience... the more you get to hear about other people the more you realize how remarkably unremarkable your own experiences are.

I read entries of people I have never met and I knew every one of them within reading 3 entries. They were all people I had encountered in my life or that I knew well. Some of their personal private comments, the ones that they probably think make them the most unique were the most easily recognizable. I won't go into deeper detail than that, but it was interesting...

On a larger note, I have been thinking lately about the effect of something like LJ and the Internet in general on community and (more specifically) the community of friends and people I know. When I was growing up I could have never imagined the communications possibilities and the types of intimate relationships that technology would make possible. I had far fewer friends than many of the kids I know today do, I couldn't have as many friends because there was no way to meet so many people or to share intimate thoughts or ideas with them. I think the long term impact of this is almost impossible to quantify. I was part of the first home computer generation. I had a computer when I was 9 and I learned how to program on it, a skill I use to this day to make my living. However, back then a computer was a glorified typewriter. It was a toy to hook up to my 13" black and white television and write little BASIC programs on. It bore as much resemblance to the titanium, 1"-thick, 15" screen laptop supercomputer I am using right now as a Ford Model T does to a Porsche 959. When I bought that computer, if I had been told that someday I would be able to share my thoughts with almost anybody in the world, watch movies, make movies, connect with friends I've never even met face to face and have more information than I could ever digest in a lifetime available to me through that little box I would have accepted it without thinking twice (since I was 9). However, I would never have thought about the profound additional consequences of that information. Having not had that knowledge and instead watching technology transform with each new generation giving me more power to do more things, watching the growth of the Internet over the last 9 years, I am still unable to really grasp the

profound implications of that. However, I see a new common language and way of socializing coming into effect. It was evident at October Ridge. It was evident in comments made by the guy who opened for Ida last night. It is probably as important as the telephone in terms of what it allows us to do with each other, how it allows us to be towards each other. I know I'm babbling, but changes like this only come around every great once in a while. The printing press. The radio, telephone, telegraph... It's amazing to be here for something like this and to benefit from it by making new friends, reconnecting with old ones and watching people get closer in general.

**an actual personal entry...**

**Wed, 14 Jan 2004 19:52:18 +0000**

I'm on my way home from work and I've decided to actually write a real honest to goodness journal entry. Not some sort of Nuclear Gopher advertisement or witty proclamation but rather something more personal...

The fact of the matter is that lately I've been avoiding my feelings pretty bad. I tend to be more productive on my projects when I do that but it's not good for interpersonal relationships. A strange thing has been helping me straighten up these last few days though, Good Day by Pop Riveter<sup>80</sup>. I keep hearing the lyrics in my head, "while I was eating, before the meeting, I was re-reading, what I had need of repeating. It was about love and how you shout love but you don't know love if you don't show love. Could read it ten times and never get it but then the sun shines so bright I'll never forget it". Such simple profound lyrics. I keep picturing my brother sitting eating ramen and contemplating what it means to show love and being so moved by it that he wrote a song about it and I think, why is it so hard for me to show real love sometimes? I provide, I service, I complete chores and rub feet and wash dishes and I think to myself that I am doing those things to show love but at the same time, I get self-absorbed, disconnected and lost in my own thoughts and all the things I do go for nothing because I don't show emotion. I don't show affection. I don't know if this is something I can honestly change about myself. I think I used to think I could but that now I'm not so sure... Sometimes I feel like I'm teetering on the brink of some precipice with the broken remains

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80 a song written and sung by my brother Reed

of my mom and my Uncle Rick at the bottom. They're my role-models for how not to live my life<sup>81</sup>....

On the other hand, I'm not feeling my age so much now as I was when I was approaching 30 and stressing about it. Maybe I was making myself feel my age psychosomatically. I don't know, but I'm feeling good physically and I hope against hope that I'm able to keep getting my head together emotionally. So many things are going well in so many other areas (work especially) that it would be tragic to let being out of touch with my emotions derail them.

**in my room**

**Mon, 15 Mar 2004 19:42:37 +0000**

I know I've posted about the garage->studio transformation project before but I just feel like writing about it... It's my journal. Don't read it if you don't care...

This week I actually WROTE A NEW SONG. I haven't been writing much lately and it's about 95% environmental. See, Amanda and I have one<sup>82</sup> major way in which we are polar opposites. I need chaos in order to function creatively and to be happy. She needs order and structure in order to function creatively and be happy. The story of the first three years of marriage with us has been one long attempt to get her the structure she needs but it has not been without a price. I have lost the chaos I need. Our apartment has been ordered and structured and decorated to the point where I am incapable of any creative output within it's walls. I cannot write music there. I cannot write prose. I cannot write, period. I don't even like to play my guitar in there. I grew up in a basement full of wires and books, a glorified rats nest. I don't know that this is a good thing but I do know that my brain was conditioned early on to accept that environment, and only that environment, as one for personal expression and creativity. If I don't have that creative chaos, I lose a big part of myself. I need a space where messes can be made and it doesn't matter, where books can be on shelves without consideration for whether it's ugly, where wires can run free and where I can hole up and get in touch with my feelings. I haven't had

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<sup>81</sup> My mom, as has been covered earlier, was still on the outs with me at this time. I felt that her affair that lead to my parents divorce and my mom's subsequent pregnancy and remarriage were proof she was reaping the consequences of a life without Jehovah's spirit. My mom's younger brother Rick has been a polygamist, has lived under tons of names, and has been a legendary scoundrel for most of my life but as a kid he was our favorite uncle, my mom's band mate, and a baptized Jehovah's Witness

<sup>82</sup> One? At this point I had become so used to lying about my relationship with Amanda on my blog that I don't know, reading it back, how I did it... We were completely miserable at this time, our relationship having deteriorated into something resembling "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

that for many years and I cannot explain what it feels like to have it again. I dream about going down into my garage, my lab, my studio and playing my guitar, writing, painting, working. I sneak down there at 5:30 in the morning and write. I have missed this so much.

Yesterday I went to Home Depot because we were painting our bedroom and I scoped out a little lumber I need to build a mezzanine shelf for a bunch of boxes in the back of the garage. When I got home I mentioned it to Amanda and she said, 'we're going to get new organizational containers for the garage when Ikea opens' and I immediately recoiled. Ikea? In my lab? Neat plastic boxes? "Storage solutions?" No no no no no no no no... Stay out Ikea! I don't want order! I don't want structure! I don't want any stupid (\*&%ing solutions! They are part of the problem! I didn't say anything in response to her Ikea suggestion. I can't expect her to understand that I am turning this space into exactly what I need it to be. That I am recreating a part of myself that I've lost. She's been down there and doesn't get it at all. I don't know what she thinks about it but she doesn't see it the way I do, I know that much. She wants to organize it. She looks in the garage and it innately feels wrong to her. Too much happening, no control. I have already decided though that it doesn't matter if she gets it. She gets the rest of the house, this is my space and I will have it my way. I wish I was there right now, I have songs to write, novels to finish, paintings to paint... so very much to do...

And so, the curtain closes on not just part 1 of this book, not just act 1 in my journal, but the entire first book of my life. On March 15th of 2004, as I wrote this journal entry, I was one of Jehovah's Witnesses and it had never occurred to me to be anything else, even when I had fantasized of leaving my life behind. I was planning a Witnesses-only music festival with my brothers and gearing up to make music in my garage, I was writing on my LiveJournal and interacting with my Witness friends on their LiveJournals, I was going to meetings at the Kingdom Hall and living as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, as I had my entire life. Yes, my marriage was awful, but every time it improved for even a day I got my hopes up and tried to keep to it. I was struggling to live the life I had, but I had no intention of ever living any other way and no clue about what was about to happen. I certainly wasn't looking for it.

## **Part 2:**

# Breaking Free



Having read this far, you now have learned a bit about me, the life I had and the life of a Jehovah's Witness. I was a dad, a husband, a musician, a software developer, and I also went door-to-door, gave talks and attended five meetings a week. I had real issues dealing with the pain of both my mother's state and also her position as a former Jehovah's Witness. I also had pain dealing with my friend Chad's defection from the religion, I mean, I refused to be his best man because of it.

There is one thing that was really camouflaged or softened in my presentation of my life over that period of time. Although you can tell by what is there that Amanda and I had ups and downs the severity of those ups and downs is not clear. The truth is that our relationship was much rockier than I ever let on in my blog. We had really reaching a point where we were only staying together because we thought Jehovah wanted us to, but she didn't want to be in Minnesota with me anymore and I couldn't handle any more of her negativity and unstable behavior. Our relationship was, to be blunt, awful. It had hit a low point and seemed like it wasn't going to come out of it.

I mention this fact about my relationship with my wife because she has been used as an explanation for what happened next by people who were close to me. People have accused me of "leaving the truth" because I wanted to get out of my bad marriage or even just wanted to get laid. They have suggested that I was worn down by Amanda and this made me spiritually weak, easy prey for Satan. My bad marriage did certainly weigh on me, but it was not the cause of what happened next.

The journal doesn't tell what happened, but a post I made to the talk.origins Usenet newsgroup sixteen days later under the pseudonym "lodger<sup>83</sup>" does.

**From:** thelod...@yahoo.com (lodger)

**Newsgroups:** talk.origins

**Subject:** you've changed my life. thanks, I think.

**Date:** Wed, 31 Mar 2004 19:38:07 +0000 (UTC)

I have had a most extraordinary last two weeks and I owe much of it to this group, or more accurately, the talkorigins.org website and I'm writing to say thanks.

I have been raised my whole life as a Jehovah's Witness and (therefore) an old-Earth creationist<sup>84</sup>. I'll be the first to admit that I've not always been the world's best JW, but I had always felt that I when I was being good I was at least standing on relatively firm ground. My upbringing and books like "Life - How

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<sup>83</sup> As a fan of Alfred Hitchcock's movies I used to use the online handle "The Lodger" in reference to one of his earlier films.

<sup>84</sup> Witnesses take great pains in their literature to avoid labeling themselves "creationists", attempting to instead: "Recoiling from [the conclusions of evolutionists] are the "scientific creationists." But their interpretation of the Genesis creation account has led them to claim that the earth is only 6,000 years old and that the six "days" allowed in Genesis for creation were each only 24 hours long. But does such an idea accurately represent what the Bible is saying? Was the earth, and all its life forms, created in just six literal days? Or is there a reasonable alternative?"- "Life—How Did It Get Here? By Evolution or by Creation?", 1985, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Page 8



Did it Get Here, By Evolution or Creation?" taught me the complete absurdity and hopelessness of the evolutionist, secular humanist view of how we got here. The arguments presented seemed to make sense and I was satisfied that my questions were being answered honestly and meaningfully. It's so strange then what has happened over the last few weeks.

It started simply enough. My wife and I were discussing the Flood and the promised Paradise Earth and we wound up postulating some rather difficult questions for ourselves. Questions like, "If all the animals were originally herbivores (as the Bible says they were before the flood and would again be in the future), wouldn't that have disastrous environmental consequences?" "Wouldn't one-celled life and insects continue to have a role to play in the food chain? If so, wouldn't at least some of it be carnivorous or parasitic?" Once I started thinking of questions I couldn't stop (and more importantly, I couldn't think of any rational answers). A few days later some friends came over and we all got to talking about the Ark and the Flood and pondering some of the same questions. Now, these friends are JW's and I have no reason to believe they have abandoned "The Truth" (as it's referred to in the organization) but one of them sent me a link to a document on TalkOrigins about the flood a few days later saying that he thought it was interesting. Interesting didn't even begin to describe it. I was blown away.

Now, I don't think I'm a stupid person. I am a 30-year-old professional software developer with a 142 IQ. I read a lot. I consider myself educated, open-minded and capable of recognizing fact versus fiction and yet there I found myself realizing for the very first time that I had been blindly accepting as a fact something that was completely impossible. Perhaps some sort of flood happened in pre-history, but a global flood, the Biblical flood of Noah as described by Jehovah's Witnesses could not have happened the way they say. It was so obvious when all the issues were laid out in one document and yet I had never noticed it before. For once, I felt stupid. I felt like I had been believing in Santa Claus (JW's don't do the Christmas thing, BTW, so it's the closest I've ever come TO believing in Santa Claus). I could have left it at that, but I didn't. If the "logic" given to me to explain the flood was wrong, I had to know what else was wrong too. Oh boy.

I went back to the beginning. In Genesis 3:15 is the first Messianic prophecy<sup>85</sup>. Everything Jehovah's Witness teach about why we are here, the purpose of life, the reason Jesus came to Earth, the hope for the future... all of it, is rooted in the Garden of Eden, the Genesis account. I decided to re-examine, with an actual open mind, the question of Creation vs. Evolution (as I pictured it, rather naively). Could the chronology of the Bible, the location of Eden, the Genesis creation account, any of it, be reconciled with science? Did any of it, in fact, happen?

Now, chronology is vitally important to Jehovah's Witnesses. It's how they calculate the "end times" and why they are sure we are living in them. If the entire basis for all Bible chronology was based on a fictional story, everything started to go out the window. It all broke down. I dug out my "Creation" book and dug in and what I discovered made me sick to my stomach. The last time I read it I was 15 and it was incredibly convincing. This time I did the actual research. I looked up the references. I checked the quotations and examined the lines of reasoning and found... pseudo-science. Fallacies. Misquotes. Deliberately misleading re-writes of quotes. Argument through incredulity. Appeals to authority. Ignorance of evidence. Selective presentation of facts. Outdated information. This was worse than determining that the flood story was impossible. This was evidence that the religion I have been raised in was actually resorting to outright deception and taking quotes out of context and presenting as science something that is really just propaganda... and that I'd fallen for it.

See, JW's pay a lot of lip-service to examining the scriptures, researching your faith, PROVING that it's THE TRUTH, keeping an open-mind. At the same time (and I'm not making this up) they have a song that has the following words:

"We must act together as one  
independence wisely we shun  
harmony and one-ness of mind  
bring peace of rarest kind"<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> "And I shall put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed. He will bruise you in the head and you will bruise him in the heel." – New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, Genesis 3:15

<sup>86</sup> "Sing Praises to Jehovah", Song 213 entitled "Working Together in Unity", Watchtower Bible and Tract Society 1984

I never felt right singing those words. Regardless, I always believed that my religious beliefs would stand up to scrutiny. I took comfort in that. I thought I HAD scrutinized them. That is what we are supposed to do. This is supposed to be a religion based on reasons for faith. To see that book for what it really was... that hurt.

Anyhow, after being basically crushed over the empty shell that is the Creation book I decided to take a serious look at evolution for the first time in my life outside of the writings of Jehovah's Witnesses. Oh. My. God. I never knew. I just never knew. I have spent the last week absorbing everything I can. I have downloaded the entire TalkOrigins.org website onto my laptop to read offline. I stayed up all night watching Discovery Science channel the night before last because of a program on hominid evolution and I just kept watching every show afterwards. I bought The Blind Watchmaker and I'm almost done reading it. I have researched radioactive dating methods, transitional fossils, Creationist arguments, abiogenesis theories and lots more and over and over and over again I have found a mountain of evidence, a mountain of evidence I had been informed didn't exist. I have found intelligent people who think for themselves, who (yes) argue and change positions and interpret things differently but who are firmly grounded in reality. The actual study of the actual world as it is, not the study of how a book says it should be and an obsession with trying to make the world appear to fit that model.

I don't know what this means for me. I know this... I am now, and on some level have always been, a secular humanist. I am suddenly comfortable in my own skin, like my mind is clear for the first time. I no longer know what role, if any, the concept of God plays in my life. It's certainly not the role that was there two weeks ago. Now that I actually understand the theory of evolution to some extent I realize it's not just a bunch of wishful-thinking atheists working on some quack theory and calling it a fact. I have developed a whole new awe and appreciation for the world I see around me, like I'm really seeing it for the first time. The geese outside my office looked like little dinosaurs to me and I got the chills. I'm 30 years old, my entire family, my wife and all my friends are Jehovah's Witnesses. If they knew for even a minute that I've conclusively disproved (for myself) all the fundamental teachings that underlay their (and my former) theology, that I had come to realize the fact of evolution (still hard for me to type that sentence...) and rejected the chronology of the Bible as impossible... they would probably never speak to me again. I

don't like the position I'm in now. I'm scared. I have no idea what to do. I have no idea how to proceed. I feel like I just opened my eyes for the first time and I don't know what the next step is.

I do, however, want to thank all you long-suffering rational folks out in Talk.Origins land. You've put together a resource that has radically changed my life in the blink of an eye and I am grateful.

lodger

That's right. In a couple of weeks I went from a Bible-believing fundamentalist lifelong Jehovah's Witness to a self-described secular humanist. I would love to say that the transition was smooth and that I handled it with dignity, grace and aplomb, but the truth is that those were the worst two weeks of my life and I was an emotional basket-case.

The complete and utter dismantling of my entire life's belief system was shockingly swift and all the plans I had going on, the music festival, my record label, all my friendships, everything I was living for, were suddenly in danger of coming to an equally swift end.

This might seem silly, dramatic, what have you, if you are not a current or former Witness but I assure you it's not. For a baptized Witness to lose their faith, to defect from the religion, is to commit an unforgivable sin. Everybody you have ever known and loved will now avoid you as much as they possibly can, including your family. All your Witness friendships will end and (in the case of most people born in the faith) that means almost every friendship you've ever had. What's worse, you will be reviled by the people you love. They will at best consider you to be under the influence of Satan and at worst an evil apostate, a traitor, and a member of the Anti-Christ. When you see old friends in the street and say hello, they will turn away from you, avoiding eye contact and hurrying in the opposite direction. You will be considered dead even as you breathe.

The psychological torment of being shunned in this manner is powerful. It has lead some to commit suicide. Often it causes people to become hypocritical, pretending to be Witnesses even when they believe none of it, just to avoid being a pariah, turning them into liars in the name of truth. As a lifelong Witness whose own mother and best friend were shunned, I understood and feared being cast into that position. On the other hand, as a person of conscience honesty was very important to me and I couldn't handle the idea of being a hypocrite forever. The conflict between staying quiet and living the hypocrite life or taking the direct path and destroying my reputation, my friendships, my marriage and my relationships with my family members had me in anguish. Eight days before my post to talk.origins and eight days after my last public post as a Witness, I privately posted this to my journal, where only I could read it.

**Private: bad juju**

**Tue, 23 Mar 2004 19:38:15 +0000**

I am now faced with a very serious dilemma. I am fairly sure that I have only one choice in the matter, which is to shut the fuck up. On the other hand, that involves making the decision to live a lie for the rest of my life.

I've always had the perspective about myself that I was generally a good guy, a bit shady for a Jehovah's Witness, but that I was basically struggling with my personal inner demons. I never anticipated I would find myself realizing that Tabithah and my mom were right about some things. Now Tab was stupid with the way she went about it and my mom bought into every piece of anti-JW propaganda she could get her hands on because it made her feel better. I, on the other hand, am different from them in that I am not having a "pre-midlife crisis" or suffering from an overdose of anger at the elders. I have just had the scaffolding knocked out from under me and I don't know how to deal with it.

My faith in the bible was based on two things: the believability of creation vs the absurdity of evolution AND the 1914 prophecy fulfillment<sup>87</sup>. It was ultimately those two things that clinched it for me. Oh sure, there were lots of other things to consider like the fact that the organization was full of good people, the fact that works were done entirely on the basis of voluntary donations, the absence of paid clergy, but all of those things were things I like about the organization in particular when compared to other religions. The only reason I felt I needed to believe in a religion at all was because of the other two things I mentioned. Now, both of those things have been knocked out from under me and I am reeling.

There are multiple things I have believed in my whole life that are provably false. Noah's Flood<sup>88</sup>. The garden of Eden<sup>89</sup>. The impossibility of evolution and lack of evidence for it. The fact that Jerusalem fell in 607 BCE<sup>90</sup>, leading to the 1914 prophecy. Noah's flood could not have happened as written. It didn't, in fact, happen. There is no explanation for it that fits with the geological record. The garden of Eden could not have been where it is claimed to have been because human kind a) predates the dates given for the garden of Eden and b) is traceable to Africa, not the Middle East. Evolution is a provable fact. The

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<sup>87</sup> According to Watchtower teaching, the founder Charles Russell had correctly interpreted Bible prophecies and determined that the last days began in 1914.

<sup>88</sup> The Watchtower promotes the idea of a literal global flood in the year 2370 BCE

<sup>89</sup> A literal place, with Adam created within circa 4026 BCE

<sup>90</sup> The year 607 is the starting point for calculating the date 1914.

only question is what causes it, not whether or not it happens. There are good sound answers for nearly all the major "unanswerable" questions that creation "science" says evolution cannot answer. And to make matters worse, the book that taught me about the absurdity of evolution and "proved" creation to me turns out to be a sham full of misquotations, junk science, logical fallacies, distortions, gaps, misrepresentations and out of date information. The most shocking for me is the 607 date, oddly enough. That's the nail in the coffin. They're off by 20 years and ALL THE EVIDENCE SAYS SO and they throw it out. They ignore it. They invent some bullshit about sandstorms. Last but not least, on some level, I always knew all of this. It always felt wrong to me. It always felt as if the answers I was being given were unsatisfactory and the ideals I was meant to follow (lack of independent thought, being part of the flock, living a life that doesn't stumble others) was a life intended for someone else. I have never been who I am. I have never actually lived my life without severe compromise. My marriages have been intended to fix problems in myself by imposing order, not find love. No wonder they suck. I've been looking for something, someone, to make me a "good" Christian when all along I have been an independent-thinking secular humanist.<sup>91</sup>

What I need to do is get out. I need to let Amanda go free and get myself DF'd. That will buy me some space from my family, I hope. I need to move into a cheaper apartment and live cheap and pay off debts and get my shit together. In a year I could be in a good shape with a nice new start. I need to get a girlfriend who isn't constrained by all the same shit I have been my whole life. How long can I make it without this sea change? How long?

Notice that I began with saying that I needed to "shut the fuck up" and live a lie for the rest of my life and ended by saying I needed to get disfellowshipped, divorced and start a new life in a new apartment with a new girlfriend. You couldn't be more conflicted than that. It was a true "to be or not to be" moment. Do I sacrifice my principles to continue my life as I've always known and loved it or do I hit the reset button, cut lose from everything Witness-related, including my family, and start from scratch? What a choice.

Those first couple weeks of my new life were horrifying. My days were spent frantically researching Watchtower teachings online, reading and posting to the talk.origins newsgroup, and periodically going into a bathroom stall to cry and pray and panic. The copies of *The Blind Watchmaker* and *A History of God* that I had purchased were hidden in a box in the garage so my wife wouldn't see them. I hardly slept, although I was monumentally tired at all times. The more I learned the worse it got for the Watchtower and the stronger the case got for disbelief. It was literally the only thing on my mind, twenty-four hours a

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<sup>91</sup> I was unfamiliar the term "secular humanist" before that week, I looked it up online to discover what you called a person who didn't believe in God and did believe in morality based on human happiness.

day, but I told nobody what was happening. I felt like I was standing at the edge of a tall cliff overlooking a sea of jagged rocks, trying to decide if I should jump.

When I finally did, it began because of a dream. It seems my subconscious couldn't take it anymore and wanted some sort of action. Well, action it got.

### The Dream of the Stubborn Wall

Amanda and I had a three cats and a dog. If the cat food was available at all times, she feared the cats would get fat or the dog would eat it and he would get fat. So, she insisted that I get up in the middle of the night to feed them because one of our cats, Holden, always insisted on eating in the middle of night and he would wake her up. I suggested that we put a bowl out for Holden overnight up on a counter where the dog (a mini-dachshund) couldn't reach it and thereby assure myself a full nights' sleep, but she wouldn't hear of it. I think she really just wanted to have the bed to herself, to be honest.

Anyhow, I would feed them and then go sleep on the couch, a short little thing from Ikea that I had to curl up on. This was the routine and I logged more miles on that couch than I ever did in our bed. The morning of April 14, the day before tax day, I woke up on that couch from the strangest dream.

In my dream I was attempting to paint a wall in our apartment. This was not unusual as I had been doing a lot of painting in the apartment over the previous six months. Amanda couldn't stand a white wall and spent her days at home watching TV shows about redecorating and planning to redo the rooms that we had just redone a few months previously. In the dream I was facing an olive green wall, paint roller in hand. I started attempting to paint the wall with white paint but as soon as the paint hit the wall it faded to olive green, blending in with the rest of the wall. This was odd, so I tried again and got the same result. I grabbed a different paint roller with a different color of paint, red this time, and rolled it on the wall only to get the same result. The paint changed color and blended in with the surrounding wall.

I started to get the ominous feeling that the wall was alive, that it was resisting my efforts to paint it. I got yet another kind of paint and tried again and this time the color stayed but something else happened, the paint dried immediately and began to peel off in large flakes. Any doubt I had about whether or not the wall was responsible for the peeling was cleared up when I noticed that rather than falling all the way to the ground, the paint flakes were being caught in a bucket that was floating in mid-air moving left and right to catch them as the fluttered down. At this I woke up.

You know how sometimes you have a dream that is obviously your subconscious trying to tell you something? This was one of those dreams and I knew it immediately as I lay on my stupid little Ikea couch in my olive green living room attempting to drag myself the rest of the way to consciousness. I could still see the wall, the bucket, the fading and peeling paint. I could still feel the sense of frustration over being thwarted in all my efforts to paint that damn wall. I got undressed and got in the shower and kept thinking about it.

It had been a month since I had discovered that the Witnesses were wrong about the Flood and most of that month had been spent researching everything else I could think of, prophecy, evolution, Biblical origins, the history of the Watchtower Society, humanism, atheism, morality, everything I could. I had successfully demolished nearly all of my previous beliefs but I had done it all in

secret. My heretical books were in the garage, hidden. I had said nothing to anybody in my family or circle of Witness friends. In fact, I'm pretty sure I hadn't even told any worldly people.

On top of that stress, my marriage seemed less and less likely to survive without a massive amount of work on both my part and Amanda's part. We weren't intimate, we weren't even particularly warm. She had brought up the idea of divorce more than once and I had talked her out of it but over the course of the month I had begun to realize more and more that it was pointless. The marriage had only a slim chance of surviving anyhow and none if I wasn't willing to keep living as a secret infidel. If I came out about my lack of belief it would probably end instantly.

Pondering all of this it became clear. The wall in the dream was simply my life, my situation. I could try all I wanted to change it, but it was what it was and I couldn't. This went both for my marriage and my religious dilemma. My life was a wall that I could not paint. I had to deal with it. I resolved to deal with one item at a time. I decided to start a conversation with Amanda about our relationship and leave the religion out of it.

As I got out of the shower and dressed for work I composed a letter to her in my head. I decided to take the softest approach I could think of. I decided to say that I knew she wanted to leave, that she was unhappy, that she and I both knew the whole thing was a mistake and had both said so, that maybe it was time to talk about that, because it seemed like it had broken down to the point where saving it would be tough. I put all of those thoughts into a letter and left it on the coffee table in the living room. At the end of the letter I said something to the effect of 'I am not leaving this in a letter to be callous, I'm just not sure if you will want to talk about this right now or if you'll want some time to think. Call me on my cell phone if you want and I will come home to talk about it.' Then I left for work. My phone rang when I was halfway to the office.

When I got home, Amanda was in tears, holding the letter in her hand. I wasn't sure what I had expected but tears were not it. Only a few weeks earlier she had been saying how much she regretted getting married and how much she wished she was still in Chicago. I didn't expect cartwheels, but tears were surprising.

We sat in the living room facing each other. She asked me if I really thought there was no way to make this work. I told her that I didn't think it was impossible, but I did think it was unlikely. I told her that from my perspective she didn't want to be here anymore and that I didn't want to make her stay and be miserable. She didn't deny that she wanted to leave or even argue that our relationship was anything other than dead. Instead she pointed out that if we got divorced it wouldn't be scriptural. In the world of the Witnesses the only allowable divorce was a divorce on grounds of infidelity, AKA a "scriptural divorce". If we were divorced without scriptural grounds neither of us could remarry without facing congregational discipline. Something neither of us would have wanted as Witnesses. Of course, I was no longer mentally a Witness so I was more concerned about the fact that our continued relationship was making both of us, and my son, miserable. I tried to dodge the issue by saying something vague about how we could worry about that issue later or something like that.

Then she asked me, "If we get divorced will you still do things with other Witnesses?" which was an odd question, I thought. I hadn't yet said anything about my lack of belief or indicated any changes in that direction. I don't really



know what prompted her to ask the question, maybe it was just that I was putting the scriptural prohibition against divorce aside, but I had no intention of telling her anything about my mental deconversion. I was determined to deal with the relationship on it's own and stay in the closet about my disbelief. I decided to lie.

"Probably not because I don't believe it's the truth anymore," I said, much to my own shock. I then blurted out a whole bunch of stuff about the various things I found out, the problems, the lies, all of it. It was like I couldn't stop. Things just kept coming out of my mouth as I looked on in horror. I told her everything.

After the conversation she asked me to leave the house and I went off to a coffee shop to figure out what I would do next. Amanda had said that she would tell my dad about my lack of belief if I didn't and so I told her I would talk to him when Syd got off school that afternoon. I went to talk.origins and posted this message.

**From:** lodger <thelod...@yahoo.com>  
**Date:** Thu, 15 Apr 2004 17:38:40 +0000 (UTC)  
**Subject:** it starts...

Well, today, for the first time, I told my wife about my new non-belief in Jehovah's Witnesses. Looks like I'm getting divorced. I wish could say I'm surprised, but calm and rational as I could be, supportive and loving of her as I could be, my leap to the dark side is too much. She wants out. Now. ASAP. She "doesn't know me anymore" and "is sad because my son is now going to die at Armageddon". She cried, she wept and now I have my family to deal with. Yippee.

Stupid fundamentalism... Why can't they just let you believe in reality? Why?

**From:** "Klaus Hellnick" <khellnicknos...@houston.rr.com>  
**Date:** Thu, 15 Apr 2004 17:54:39 +0000 (UTC)

"lodger" <thelod...@yahoo.com> wrote in message

> Stupid fundamentalism... Why can't they just let you believe in reality?  
Why?

Bummer. What did she say when you asked that?  
Klaus

**From:** lodger <thelod...@yahoo.com>

**Local: Thurs, Apr 15 2004 1:03 pm**

"Klaus Hellnick" <khellnicknos...@houston.rr.com> wrote:

> Bummer. What did she say when you asked that?

She just said that when we got married I loved Jehovah and now I didn't. That's her reality. Jehovah. It's the only one a person CAN accept. If I don't, I'm not believing in reality, I'm believing in Satan's world. How can I argue with that?

Lodger

**From: AC <mightymartia...@hotmail.com>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 18:30:19 +0000 (UTC)**

I don't know what I can say other than keep your chin up. It is going to get worse before it gets better, but it will get better I promise. My thoughts are with you.

--

Aaron Clausen

mightymartia...@hotmail.com

**From: Tom McDonald <tmcdonald2...@charter.net>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 19:24:51 +0000 (UTC)**

Lodger,

I am sorry for your pain, and that of your family. As you are well aware, it takes guts, honesty and support to make the kind of changes you are. If you have a support network outside of JW's, now's the time to do some serious leaning.

I hope that you feel free to come here for some support also. Many here have experienced something like what you are going through, and have survived. It can happen for you.

Tom McDonald

**From: Ken Shaw <none...@your.biz>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 20:17:38 +0000 (UTC)**

> Stupid fundamentalism... Why can't they just let you believe in reality?  
Why?

Because that would mean giving up some of the power they have over others.

I'm presently helping a friends niece deal with being disfellowshipped and effectively abandoned by her immediate family. You need to develop relationships outside of the JW's otherwise the loneliness will get to you. If you would state where you are I feel sure some of the T.O denizens who live near you would be happy to organize a howlerfest for you to attend. If you live anywhere near chicago you're welcome to come into the city and I'll take you to the Field Museum and let you see some of what you've been missing.

Ken

**From: Jacqueline Gay <b...@hyperactivesw.com>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 21:13:35 +0000 (UTC)**

I rarely post, but I want you to know that I have been following your journey with great interest. I am so sorry to hear that your wife cannot understand. You will find in the long run that you have made the correct choice in following rationality wherever it may lead. But the fallout from family members who can't make the same journey can be very painful -- I know this from my own experience. My thoughts are with you.

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There are 247 real people in the world and the rest are ducks.

**From: "R.Schenck" <nygdan\_morteauxs...@yahoo.com>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 23:17:15 +0000 (UTC)**

Jacqueline Gay <b...@hyperactivesw.com> on 15 Apr 2004 posted

> There are 247 real people in the world and the rest are ducks.

you have a sig like that and rarely post!? For shame.

**From: Sverker Johansson <lsj.hlk...@homo.sapiens.se>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 21:33:01 +0000 (UTC)**

lodger wrote:

> She just said that when we got married I loved Jehovah and now I didn't.

Wives usually quit when you \_start\_ loving somebody else, not when you stop. :)

And whether you loved \_her\_ and still love \_her\_ is not relevant for her??

> That's her reality. Jehovah. It's the only one a person CAN accept. If I don't, I'm not

> believing in reality, I'm believing in Satan's world. How can I argue with that?

Lost cause. Just do your damned best to make sure your kids, if any, grow up in the real universe, not in her custody.

--

Best regards,

Sverker Johansson

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"A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death." - Albert Einstein  
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**From: AC <mightymartia...@hotmail.com>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 22:12:33 +0000 (UTC)**

On Thu, 15 Apr 2004 21:33:01 +0000 (UTC), Sverker Johansson  
<lsj.hlk...@homo.sapiens.se> wrote:

> And whether you loved \_her\_ and still love \_her\_ is not relevant for her??

JWs are programmed to step back from "worldly" people. I know of some believer-non-believer marriages (my oldest aunt is one, and they've been married for nearly sixty years). However, the general rule of thumb is once one announces he or she is leaving, the marriage is over.

> Lost cause. Just do your damned best to make sure your kids, if any, grow up in the real > universe, not in her custody.

Under normal circumstances, I would be horrified by someone giving that advice to another person. With JWs, however... :-(

--

Aaron Clausen

**From: "R.Schenck" <nygdan\_morteauxs...@yahoo.com>**

**Date: Thu, 15 Apr 2004 23:26:28 +0000 (UTC)**

AC <mightymartia...@hotmail.com> on 15 Apr 2004 posted

> Under normal circumstances, I would be horrified by someone giving that advice to an

> other person. With JWs, however... :-(

All of this indicates that more than ever that fundamentalism like this is a true terror and that people putting up the 'fight' against it are not engaged in some unworthy endeavour. Its insane that Lodger and his family have to deal with this, because of some religion that is literally too strict to let people think for themsvels. Abhorent.

**From: "Klaus Hellnick" <khellnicknos...@houston.rr.com>**

**Date: Fri, 16 Apr 2004 00:49:03 +0000 (UTC)**

"lodger" <thelod...@yahoo.com> wrote in message

- > She just said that when we got married I loved Jehovah and now I didn't.
- > That's her reality. Jehovah. It's the only one a person CAN accept.
- > If I don't, I'm not believing in reality, I'm believing in Satan's
- > world. How can I argue with that?

So, the "real world" belongs to satan? What twisted book did she get that from?  
Klaus

**From: drear...@hotmail.com (Von Smith)**

**Date: Fri, 16 Apr 2004 10:01:32 +0000 (UTC)**

I realize that this may not be the most sensitive thing I could say at this point, especially since I don't know you or your wife at all. But what the above paragraph basically boils down to is that your wife doesn't love you, and may or may not ever have. I mean, you make it sound as if she didn't even really agonize over the decision. Perhaps it is too early to say, perhaps she will reconsider when she's slept on it, but based on what you and others have said, I'm not optimistic, and it doesn't sound like you are, either.

Now that I've rained another half inch on your already-drenched parade, there is a bright side to this. There is much to be said for not living a lie, especially when that lie includes the lie that you have lots of friends and mentors in your church who care about, respect, and value \*you\* as a person.

People outside JW have that. They have friends and family who love you even when they think the new religion or ideology you've chosen is stupid, wrong, or even dangerous. They have friends and family who don't insist that you're either exactly like them or you're Satan. They have friends and family who will work with you and for you just because you're you.

You can have that, too. You deserve it. Maybe you deserve this even more than most of us, since you've had to sacrifice so much for opportunities the rest of us usually take for granted. But you won't get it from anyone in the Watchtower at this point, because like many cults, it subverts and even perverts normal human bonds and emotions to the point where they are hardly recognizable as human.

Most importantly, you've found a friend in yourself. You have shown a great deal of courage and integrity, and I hope things turn out for you. My thoughts will be with you. You don't know me, and you will probably never meet me personally, and there isn't much I can do for you on a practical level, so I understand that may or may not mean much. But there it is.

I hope that whatever higher power and/or source of all truth is \*really\* out there will give you the strength and guidance you need to get through this.

Von Smith

Fortuna nimis dat multis, satis nulli.

There were many more. I haven't included them all, but sometimes I still go back into the archives of talk.origins and read them. It's good to feel that humanity is essentially good. I stayed online for a while but then I had to go take my next step. I had to go see my dad.

Dad

My dad and I had our issues over the years. There was the hunting thing, chronicled earlier, but there had been plenty of other things over the years. For example, he hadn't been a big fan of me getting married at age 19, which in retrospect I agree with. I think that he and I butted heads a lot because I was messy, rebellious and generally a smarty-pants. Still, after he and my mom divorced and then Tab and I divorced we bonded pretty well. We started playing a lot of basketball together and going fishing and it was really nice. I even lived back at home for awhile.

I felt I had only recently really gained a relationship with my dad and now I was going to have to go tell him something that I knew would destroy any hope I'd ever have of having that relationship ever again. My dad wasn't just a Witness, he was an Elder, a leading minister in the congregation. When I got baptized at the age of 16, I remember him looking at me with tears in his eyes and saying that I was now not only his son, I was his brother. The thing he was proudest of as a father was that his children "loved Jehovah" and now I was going to tell him that I was no longer sure God even existed.

The next morning after talking to him I went to work, read all the kind comments and support, and wrote about the rest of the day's events.

**From:** thelodger <thelod...@nospamyahoo.com>

**Date:** Fri, 16 Apr 2004 13:32:33 +0000 (UTC)

In article <WVFfc.6259\$Se5.5...@fe2.texas.rr.com>, Klaus Hellnick wrote:

> So, the "real world" belongs to satan? What twisted book did she get that from?

The bible. 1 John 5:19. New World Translation:

"We know we originate with God, but the whole world is lying in the [power of the] wicked one."

My dad used this yesterday in attempting to explain to me that even if all the evidence of science points to conclusions other than the Bible's, it was not cause to abandon faith in the Bible because as 2 Corinthians 11:14 says, "Satan himself keeps transforming himself into an angel of light". Things can appear to be correct, truthful, but it's all Satan's deception. He has altered all the evidence, that's why the two don't agree.

This is what I'm up against.

I'm going to write a big post about my experiences yesterday. It will be of interest to a few people here I expect...

lodger

From: **thelodger <thelod...@nospamyahoo.com>**

Date: **Fri, 16 Apr 2004 14:35:05 +0000 (UTC)**

This is to everybody who has posted here in my support. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Yesterday was a day that was so long that it seemed like a week. By the time I fell asleep last night I couldn't even convince myself that the morning had been the same day. I woke up, showered and decided to tell her. Once I made that decision it was like stepping off a cliff. Everything just happened on it's own, this chain of events.

For those who said that my wife quite possibly didn't really love me in the first place, that thought had occurred to me. It had occurred to me before this. I'm not going to lie about it, our marriage wasn't perfect. There was a lot of take on her part and a lot of give on mine. She and I have had our share of conflicts, often because I've felt as if I have been taken advantage of. Still, on some level,



we've always clicked, we've always loved each other even when we were mad at each other. I think that's normal, right?

My son is from my first marriage which, quite ironically, ended when my first wife stepped off the same cliff and left JW's and I pulled tighter towards the group. I understand my wife's emotions, the fear, the agony of being tied to somebody who will undermine your faith. I understand wanting to leave. I did the same thing myself 7 years ago. This will be my second marriage split up because one of the participants no longer wanted to be a JW and I'm only 30. I will now have been on both sides of the experience.

After a long emotional conversation yesterday morning with her, I left the house on her request. She called her parents (also JW's) who were shocked and saddened. They live in Chicago, we live in Minneapolis. Her dad immediately jumped in the car to come support his daughter. I was at a coffee shop with Internet access when this all happened. That's when I posted my message.

Eventually, my cell rang and it was her. She asked me to pick up moving boxes for her as she was planning to leave within 48 hours. She had a plan. Her parents would pick her and some of her stuff up and she would move back to Chicago. She would get the rest of her stuff later. I got boxes for her and some Wendy's for her lunch and brought them to her. I then went to my son's school and picked him up and headed to my dad's house. I had my step-mom watch my son while my dad and I went to a park to talk. I told him that we were splitting and I told him I no longer accepted the beliefs of JW's.

A 2 1/2 hour debate ensued in which I had everything but the kitchen sink thrown at me. You can't trust scientific evidence because Satan is a great deceiver and can falsify anything. Sure the Watchtower Society (WTS) makes mistakes, that's to be expected, a few quotes taken out of context or misquoted shouldn't be cause for alarm, they aren't scientists after all. Maybe there are things you can't explain (like how koalas survived the flood) but won't it be amazing when the new scrolls are opened (Revelation 20:12) in the paradise in the future and the answers to those questions are revealed? (Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it's beyond an appeal to scripture, it's an appeal to scriptures that **\*\*don't even exist yet\*\***.) We talked about evolution, creation, the documentary hypothesis of the Bible's authorship, whether the WTS was trustworthy. Ultimately, I was accused. I was told that the reason I had done this terrible

thing was because I had not been keeping myself spiritually strong enough. I had opened myself up for being tricked by Satan. He was a great deceiver and I had been deceived because of my badness and lack of discipline in sticking to the organization. I tried to explain that it was simply the nature of how I look at life. If I have two explanations in front of me and one is completely satisfying and requires no leaps of faith at all but the other requires tremendous leaps of faith, I'm not taking the leap. I not only can't, I see no compelling reason to.

My father was terrified. He was sickened. He was sadder than I've ever seen him. It was worse than when his dad died. It was worse than the day he broke his wrist and then his dog got killed by a car in front of the house. He was crushed. One of his own children had betrayed Jehovah.

When I got home after that, my son and I entered the house and his first question was "Dad, what's with the boxes?". So I had to sit down with him and explain. I had to tell him that she was moving back to Chicago, that I still wanted her to be happy but that it was very hard for her that I had changed my mind about being one of Jehovah's Witnesses. He cried. He didn't want her to go and didn't want her to take any pets with her either (she's taking the dog and one of the cats). I told him that I loved him very much. I calmed him down and reminded him that it was just me and him in the past and it was good. He remembered that, and liked it, and seemed to wrap his mind around all of this change remarkably quickly. I love my son. He is an amazing person. 9 years old, with divorced parents and a divided religious upbringing and he's such a great kid... It was hard for him to understand what I was saying when I said I changed my mind about Jehovah and ultimately he just said, "I guess adults change their minds a lot".

I next learned that my soon-to-be-former-father-in-law was on his way up from Chicago and not happy at all. I decided it was best if my son and I got out of there. I took him out for pizza and then to his mom's place. I told her all about what was going on and we had a long conversation about what's involved in leaving the JW's. She had been through it herself. I found out that her and I had even read some of the same books. Her main advice, "make sure you have some friends and people you can rely on, it get's very lonely". She asked who (if anybody) I had. I told her about a good atheist friend of mine and the handful of non-JW friends I have. I told her about this newsgroup. She was

glad to hear that I had somebody. I have to say, considering that there has been some bad history between us over this the possibility of her rubbing my nose in how I was during our divorce was there. She didn't do it though. She was nice. Supportive. Sympathetic. Everything an ex-wife normally isn't.

After I left her place I just wanted to stay away from home. I went out to a sports bar, plugged in my laptop and did some reading and writing. I know, it was an odd location for it, but it was very late and they were open and had Internet access. I stayed out past 1:00 until I was sure that when I got home there would be no chance of running into my wife or her dad. I went down in the garage where I have an old bed and my recording studio (I'm a musician too) and went to sleep. I got up early this morning and drove off to work and here I am. I just read all your posts and I'm touched and they truly have helped. All of them.

My dad took the line that if you reject the literal truth of the Bible, then you lose all reason for morality. You have no higher power to answer to so you can do whatever you want. I told him that wasn't true, that it was not only possible, but natural, to have ethics and morals, to support and care about your fellow human beings without either accepting or rejecting any belief in a higher power. It was possible to marvel at the world without having to then imagine it as the product of the work of some all powerful God. This group of people right here, you fine people, illustrate that point. You show a love for truth and true human decency and compassion. You're "worldly". You're not supposed to be able to do that. You're supposed to be godless and immoral because you accept evolution and refuse to believe in superstitious stories. Thank you for proving yet another thing I had been taught wrong.

I can only imagine what's happened outside of my experiences yesterday. I'm sure my father has spoken to my siblings. There has probably been a lot of prayer and crying. There are elders calling elders, trying to assess the situation, to determine if I can be helped and how best to help my wife cope with my situation. It is, as I said, very much like stepping off a cliff. Once you take the first step, the gravity takes over. The phrase "Hello jaggy rocks, how you doin'?" popped into my head yesterday. I know I'll be happier when I land, get up and go on with my life. Despite the long long day I had and the long long week I'm looking forward to, I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I took the step. Falling is scary, but it doesn't have to kill you.

lodger

Over the next couple of weeks, Amanda came back to pick up more of her stuff, during which time I stayed away from my house. Mainly I started trying to figure out what to do next. Other than working and sleeping, I don't remember too much of what happened. My mom and I talked a lot. I remember that. She was very glad that I was leaving the Witnesses but also insistent that I needed to keep Jesus in my life. We argued about that.

10 days later, another private post:

**this fucking change**

**Mon, 26 Apr 2004 19:33:25 +0000**

Tonight Rhett and Robbie will both be by. Rhett is coming by to pick up some CD's, Robbie to talk. I have no idea how long my conversation with Robbie will be or what it will be about but I really hope it happens without hurting her feelings too much. I remember how hard it was for both of us when mom went apostate. This can't feel much better.

Reading the discussion over on Hiromi's blog [triggered by] the conversation that he and I had<sup>92</sup> I can't help but be struck with the fact that the beliefs that he and other JW's live by are really incredibly vague and groundless. It's easy to say that you have a factual basis for your faith but nobody ever really wants to examine that factual basis objectively. Everybody says they need to question their faith and prove it to themselves, but they never actually do. Nobody does. Ever. They never look outside the WTS publications. Sure, there are those who have big personal crises and leave the organization to "go worldly" for awhile, but I am unaware of many (or any that I know personally) people who have gone the route I'm going. To leave simply because it's not true. That is a

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<sup>92</sup> Hiromi had called me on the telephone to try to reason with me and share his brief stint "turning atheist" when he was a teenager. His blog post said, in part: "It's amazing isn't it, how easy it is to fool one's self? Vision is a testament to that. Your eyes produce two separate images of the world around you. The images alone are actually upside down, bloodshot and hazy, so in order for us to see the world that we do, the images are sent to the optic part of our brain, where the images are joined, flipped and the gaps filled in by our known realities. ... Really then, when one is truly objective about reality, the only thing anyone can be certain of is his own existence. That said, what causes people to make decisions based on illusion? What is the catalyst that moves humans to believe in the intangible? ... The sole fact is that you exist, and the gospel desires you share with the 6 billion other people on this planet to stay alive and find happiness will go unfulfilled by any of the allurements of this world. The vision of our hearts is easily determined by what we choose to ignore. ... When I was at the height of my confusion years ago, everything seemed equally possible and impossible. Each piece of new knowledge contributed to my suspicion that there was more to know, and knowing that made me doubt that I knew enough to know anything at all. But the one thing that gave me direction was an objective view of life paths. When you look at the results, the "fruits", the right path is so much more obvious. ... Whether the world is an illusion or not, we still need to go to work, we still need to eat and we still need to do our best to be good people. I would just hope, that instead of focusing on small "facts" that contradict what is great on the whole, I would be able to look at the big picture, and recognize what is best over all." – From the blog post entitled "Cogito Ergo Sum" and the subsequent discussion thread, April 21, 2004, Hiromi Matsumoto

hard realization to come to. The result of an extensive battle against programming. When you've been programmed, you can never know it. It's part of the programming. So, getting to where I have gotten to is unusual. My family won't truly know what to make of it, of course. I don't blame them. I barely knew what to make of it myself.

I shouldn't really care that my name is going to be dragged through the mud. It's inevitable and I will just have to fuckin' live with it. I don't like it, but c'est la vie...

The news having spread within the Witness community rather far and wide, over the 11 days since I told my dad, I decided to post a public explanation of what was going on. I tried to be as gracious as I possibly could, my main concern being the fear that people would see me as an evil demonic apostate instead of just a guy who couldn't find a reason to believe. At the time I still believed in the Watchtower Society depiction of bitter, negative, hateful, spiteful, demonic former members. In the times since I have learned that this stereotype is rarely if ever true.

**what's goin' on...**

**Mon, 26 Apr 2004 19:36:12 +0000**

I have gone through something the last month that definitely appears to all my friends and family like a terrible thing. It appears, from without, that I have suddenly rejected Jehovah, rejected my wife, rejected all my friends and family and opted for being some sort of worldly jerk. This is not entirely true and is actually quite misleading.

I have a meeting scheduled with the elders on Wednesday night<sup>93</sup>. I have serious, major issues that I need discussed and yes, they have left me in a state best described as agnosticism. My faith in the organization and a literal interpretation of the Bible is currently gone, and therefore my faith in a personal creator and god named Jehovah is as well. Can they be restored? Time will tell. That's why I'm talking to the elders. I admit I'm skeptical that I can go back because "extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof" and I need a lot of convincing. I won't go into any issues here because I don't want to offend or upset anybody. I may have things I don't believe anymore, but I am not at all interested in personally rejecting any of the people I've ever loved or in

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<sup>93</sup> As suggested by my father when I spoke to him

tearing down or damaging anybody else's faith. I have scientific issues, not a sudden lack of morality or disrespect towards others.

It is true, however, that I initiated a breakup with my wife and that it has pained her greatly<sup>94</sup>. I feel terrible about that, even though she doesn't believe me when I say it. I love her and want her to be happy. The whole story is significantly more complex, however. Our relationship has been an unhealthy codependent relationship for years, and not just for me, for her. She needs me to care for her and resents me for it. I need to take care of her and resent her for it. There has been a lot of animosity on both sides for a very long time. This is not sudden and not related to my situation with the organization. She has not been happy or healthy and neither have I. I want her to be happy and healthy. I want her to find self-sufficiency and stability. I don't want her to feel trapped in an unhealthy home (which is exactly how she has felt for the last few years, by her own admission). I have not "rejected" her, but have made a painful decision that I believe is in her (and my) best interests. Even had I not reached the conclusions I've currently reached about the organization, I believe our relationship was headed for this and that it is the best thing overall. I think she will be a happier and healthier and more spiritual person 10 years from now without me than she would have been with me. I'm lonely. I'm sad. But I'm also relieved because I feel like the best long term situation can take place now. I can deal with my issues, she with hers. She will rely on the congregation in a way she never has and I hope she finds support, love and answers there. I also hope that more importantly she learns to be a complete person in herself and learns that people are not evil and can enrich her life.

I definitely don't expect anybody to support, or even understand, my actions these last weeks. The only way that would be possible is if a person had lived in our house, experienced our relationship and spent months agonizing over whether, with objective self-analysis, it was possible to be the husband and person she needs in the long run. I decided it was not possible and made a decision based on that, but it was very very very hard to do.

I am going to continue to write here, even though I presume none of you will read it. No matter my beliefs, I will not write anti-Witness garbage here, I still hate apostates, I will not personally attack anybody at any point, I will always

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<sup>94</sup> In retrospect, I'm not sure it pained her at all, but I was trying to be gracious about the whole thing, at least publicly

respect the people I love and I will always hope for the best for Amanda and help her in any way I can. If the elders are able to help me, everybody will know soon enough. If Amanda and I are happier and healthier in the long run will simply be a matter of time. For now, please, support her. She needs it.

### **Anonymous**

i don't know you and you don't know me but i myself have had perhaps some similar issues, i got mine sorted out, i hope you get yours figured out so that you can live a life that makes you happy and comfortable with yourself. you seem like an open minded, intelligent, talented individual so my suggestion is that if you haven't read the entire bible, read it from cover to cover with an open mind. i'm guessing you have read other books that have supported things that make sense to you and that perhaps conflict with what the bible contains. so why not let the bible speak for itself and read it. if you don't understand it use various reference materials, including the watchtower publications to do your research. if you have read the whole book and done the research, well that doesn't surprise me because that would confirm what i've come to learn about you reading your web pages. again i do think your an intelligent, talented person with great ideas but if you haven't read the book that contains things you are resisting at this point i think you're missing part of the piece to your puzzle. if i abandoned an organization i was part of i would at least want to read where it was obtaining it's information from.<sup>95</sup>

### **friends helping friends**

**Fri, 30 Apr 2004 19:31:08 +0000**

I have heard from a few people about what's going on in my life and I have to admit I have been a little surprised by who those people have been in a couple of cases. It's great to know people care, especially when I didn't really anticipate it. So to everyone who has called or emailed or commented here, thanks. I appreciate it.

On Wednesday I had a 2 1/2 hour meeting with the elders. They were kind, supportive and tried to give me some things to think about. I'm trying to think about them, trying to look at things from a different perspective. They weren't able to provide explanations or answers to my questions or rebuttals to the evidence I have learned about and admitted as much. They did, however, attempt to give me some different ways to think about the issue of whether or not I can honestly continue to be one of Jehovah's Witnesses. They said that the scientific issues I had raised could not really be addressed by the Society and

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95 I received this advice countless times from countless people. For the record, I have read the Bible my entire life in bits and pieces multiple times as a matter of course in congregation meetings. I have also read it in a cover to cover manner. I am intimately familiar with the Bible.

even acknowledged that it was possible the Society was wrong on some points (a surprising thing to hear coming from two elders). They agreed that it was better to be honest about all of this than to be hypocritical and pretending I believed things I did not believe. They suggested, however, that rather than basing my faith on the truth or falsehood of a literal interpretation of Genesis that I consider perhaps judging the organization on the basis of it's fruitage. Looking at the fact that Witnesses don't kill each other in wars, show love to one another and the like. Perhaps, they have suggested, I can come to recognize those qualities as proof that they are God's organization.

This line of reasoning was also put forth by my dad and my sister and my brother and a few others as well. I'm trying to judge for myself if it can be enough for me. I've never been convinced by that line of reasoning in the past. I always figured that any human group can be good and moral if that is the code they chose to live by. The Amish come to mind as do lots of other fundamentalist, God fearing, Bible-based groups. Does it illustrate divine guidance or simply the inherent desire of certain people to live lives that are moral? I've always assumed the latter. It wouldn't be enough to simply say "the morality of the Organization is a good thing and I agree with it so I can be a part of it" because of the witnessing aspect. I could not witness to people things I did not believe. If I believed the Garden of Eden account was a myth, I couldn't tell somebody it was a historical event and the cause for suffering in the world today. I mean, I could, but not without lying. So, it's not enough to admire the traits of the organization, I actually have to convince myself that they are irrefutable proof of God's involvement (if I can't convince myself of the historicity of the Bible). I have to be so convinced of this that I am able to accept the idea that Satan has altered all the scientific evidence I've seen (including DNA, fossils, the Earth's crust, starlight and the laws of physics). If science tells me human beings are a species twenty times more ancient than the Bible says, I have to be so convinced by the organization's fruitage that I can ignore that or discount it or I am stuck being a hypocrite. It's an incredible quandry... Even if I want to be in the organization for some reasons (friends, family, agreement with many moral teachings) I can't really do it at the cost of being a hypocrite about doctrines. I know this way of thinking is enough for a lot of people and I'm trying to determine if it can honestly be enough for me. Can it be a jumping off point for faith?



Another point that has been brought up by a few people is the feeling they have of a close relationship with Jehovah. The feeling they have that they are drawn to him, that he helps them in their daily lives. Some people have suggested that I look there as a starting point. That I try to cultivate a relationship with him in my heart. This I know I can't do without something else to go on because I know that devout people of all faiths believe just as firmly that they have a close relationship with God in their hearts. The human mind and emotions can definitely make you feel that, entirely on their own. That's the only possible explanation for the fact that every sufficiently devout person feels it, regardless of their religion. I know that's not enough for me. I need to believe that he is real first, and then that he wrote this book, second and finally that he's guiding the Watchtower Society, third. I just can't approach it from the "personal relationship" standpoint. I've determined that much.

So, my conclusions so far:

- science definitively disproves a literal interpretation of many key Bible accounts, but does not definitively prove or disprove the existence of God
- faith in God is not, for many people, based on acceptance of the historical accuracy or infallibility of the Bible
- the only way I can see that I can in good conscience present myself as a witness is if one of these other methods of developing faith is sufficiently powerful to negate point #1 in my own mind
- no matter what I do, my decision must be based on being entirely honest with myself and the people around me, not on a desire to be a part of a group

And that's where I'm at....

**(Anonymous)**

some of your issues and yeah you need to be honest with yourself, comfortable with yourself, you need to be able to live with yourself. why do scientists keep researching? are the answers that science had 50 years ago the same as the answers today? 50 years is a long time to wait to confirm something. i'm an accountant, i look at numbers on a sheet of paper and am pretty sure they are right and a week to 6 months later i'm done the work proving that the numbers are correct. it drives me nuts sometimes. how did i know the numbers were right in the first place?

probably because of other factors not directly related to the numbers. maybe it's the 'fruitage' of the numbers : ) i'm glad you are not letting emotional matters get too much in the way of your search, the heart is misleading sometimes and yes people of all religions and walks of life have feelings of closeness in their heart. you said "the scientific issues I had raised could not really be addressed by the Society and even acknowledged that it was possible the Society was wrong on some points" it's interesting that when i was struggling with unsettled issues comments like that brought me relief for some non obvious reason. i still don't have all the answers i want but being a student of the bible is a continual process and being a scientist is a continual process. i wish you all the best

### **(Anonymous)**

First, I need to tell you that I am proud of you: you are entering onto a path that appears hidden and treacherous. But you continue on knowing that this will lead you somewhere.

A man nick-named Sinjun said that in order to progress as a moral community and as True individuals, we must go through Dark Nights of the Spirit. Just as biology proves that humans do most of their physical growing during the night, so do we grow during the metaphoric night spiritually & emotionally. In order to find comfort, satisfaction, and honesty within our own personal faiths we need to know ourselves and follow through on the path in darkness. The reward is a higher level of consciousness and an acceptance of self and others that will continue to grow.

You are leaving a Mystic-Literal faith and entering into a period of Truth-seeking. This is good. Despite the academia and science of your approach, in order to learn anything of value, you also need to search with your heart and soul--not just the facts of your mind. They are all interconnected and if you ignore one, you ignore all: you will not grow.

And most of all, I want to see you grow. I see the potential there for a spirituality that can bring you joy rather than anger & frustration. It is a difficult path; the light is dim and confusing. But the returns are so great, for you and for those who love you.

Once again, I am proud of you.

At this point I posted a paragraph-by-paragraph critical analysis of the first chapter of the Creation book, a post that no longer exists. It provoked a very negative reaction among my Witness LiveJournal friends.

**sorry to have offended...**

**Mon, 03 May 2004 19:26:29 +0000**

I've moved some things off my public journal into my private posts as they offended some. I am not intending to do that, so, my apologies all around... Perhaps some things are just best left private...

**nuclear gopher**

**Wed, 05 May 2004 19:24:37 +0000**

Due to recent events in my life, I have made the decision to remove myself from involvement in Nuclear Gopher. I don't wish to stumble anybody or upset any of the wonderful talented people who record music, discuss stuff or make movies at the NG site, so I'm respectfully stepping out of the picture. It's not necessarily public knowledge (as in, random visitors to the NG website wouldn't know it) but everybody in every band on NG is a Witness. While I'm not disassociated or disfellowshipped, my beliefs don't really fit that definition now and very likely never will again so rather than get in the way of the fun at NG, I'm going to stop being involved. If nobody really wants an NG anymore, well, it's been awesome. If so, I'll keep being a fan and I'll buy everybody's CD's when they come out. Maybe NG no longer has a purpose, who knows? I guess that will be up to others to decide now. What this means is that I'm going to let Rhett and Reed and whoever else needs to be involved have all the info they need to run NG. The email service, the website, the sales accounts with the CD distributor, the CafePress store, the domain management stuff... all of it... I hope they keep up with it this time (unlike the paralysis of last time).

**(Anonymous)**

ah, the odd social schisms that erupt when facts collide w / fundamentalist christian dogma and one just can't keep the head nodding alongside those with "faith".

**(Anonymous)**

you're cool. because you're anonymous.

rebekah

**my last post as vioman**

**Tue, 20 Jul 2004 19:17:27 +0000**

I do not know what people have heard about me in the last few months. I am certain that the overwhelming public perception is "Ryan left the truth and his wife". This is my last post here on LJ and it's intent is for no reason other than

to provide a public statement of my beliefs so that in case you meet me on the street or hear something about me, you know where I stand. There is no bitterness or angst and no discussion of my crisis of faith. It's simply a statement of what I now believe that I want to make available in a semi-public way so that there is no confusion. So, here goes:

This is not easy for you to read, I'm sure, but in all honesty I do not believe the Bible is the inspired word of God and I neither believe in nor worship the God of the Bible. I am a weak atheist, one who does not believe God exists but who leaves open the possibility that new evidence could come to light that changes that view. I am not a member of, and will not become a member of, any organized religion outside of Jehovah's Witnesses and I have furthermore not officially disassociated myself from (or been disfellowshipped from) Jehovah's Witnesses despite my beliefs. My reasons for not disassociating have to do with the "weak" part of my atheism. I wish to leave the door open to have conversations with the elders of a spiritual nature in case I come across new information. I have had extensive conversations with the elders about my beliefs and also have written them a letter explaining my position. It has so far been respected.

Regarding Amanda, I will simply say that she chose to leave, of her own free will, and had been indicating the desire to leave / divorce for over a year before we split. I do not wish for her return for my sake, Syd's sake and her sake. It just isn't healthy for anybody. However, I do not wish her ill will.

Knowing what I don't believe is one thing, knowing what I do believe is something else. I am a secular humanist and believe in treating people with love, respect, decency and honor. I believe in allowing others their beliefs even if they conflict with my own. I believe in showing respect for my fellow man and for the planet I live on. Since I no longer believe in a paradise Earth or a resurrection I believe that the life I have now is that much more precious and valuable and should be used to what ends I see fit. I do not feel empty, hopeless or alone without my former beliefs. Instead I feel fulfilled, grounded and as if the world I live in makes sense for the first time. I am not afraid.

As a secular humanist, I have mixed feelings about religion in general. I believe it to be of human origin and to provide certain positives (community, moral teachings) and certain negatives (fear, repression, divisiveness). If a Witness

knocked on my door or I met you or another Witness friend of mine on the street I would not attack your beliefs, would not attempt to de-convert you, would not attempt to belittle or disrespect you. If religion is important to you and is a positive force in your life, I'm glad and I hope for it to stay in that role for you.

It is inevitable that I'm going to be at a show at First Ave or at a mall or something and run into some of you LJ people and you're going to think "whoa, it's Ryan" and maybe you won't want to talk to me. But, if you do, I promise to respect you and what you believe since I am intimately aware of what it means to hold those beliefs. In return, I simply ask that you do me the courtesy of respecting that my beliefs come through honest and open consideration of the evidence I see, just as yours do. The fact that we've reached different conclusions doesn't mean one of us is evil, it just means that we have reached different conclusions. What this means in practice is that I would rather meet a friend, give them a hug hello, show them I miss them and talk about music or kids or whatever than dredge these things up. I won't try to tear you down, talk about religion or anything that would make you uncomfortable. I don't see what I could possibly hope to gain by doing that other than to make a person I care about feel bad.

If you know anybody who knows me who is wondering what is going on with me, please feel free to direct them to this LJ posting as it is, I hope, a clear answer to the question.

I love all of you and I wish you all the best. I've loved the last 15 years of Nuclear Gopher, the shows, the movies, Loose Knit Cinema, the time spent at assemblies and conventions, so much good time spent with good people. I miss you all...

Ryan

**(Anonymous)**

I can only quote Jenny Holzer.  
"humanism is obsolete"

**Ryan**

What an odd thing to say... I mean, unless humans themselves become obsolete I have a hard time understanding what this could possibly mean...

### **(Anonymous)**

All I can say is that anyone who has the courage to stand up and say, at great risk of unpleasant personal consequences, what they believe is a great human being. How can anyone have anything but respect for that?

Six months into my post-deconversion life, I was in many ways recovering nicely. I had begun dating, refurnished my apartment to replace what had left with Amanda, and kept myself fairly active with the few friends I still had. My new "worldly" friends told me how impressed they were with how well I was doing.

The truth is, however, that I was not doing well at all. It wasn't about what I had, it was about what I no longer had. I was being introduced to the experience of being shunned and I didn't like it one bit. The changes in my life when I first started being shunned were subtle but devastating. I no longer felt I could call any of my old friends or family because, even if they took my call, I knew they would resent me calling them and they wouldn't act like themselves. People I had previously been comfortable, open, and relaxed around would now be awkward, uncomfortable, looking for a reason to get off the phone as soon as possible. All of my old friends stopped contacting me as well, via email, or telephone. The silence was deafening. In that silence, in that isolation, I was left with only my imagination about what they thought of me and the picture my imagination painted wasn't good.

I knew what they were thinking because I would be thinking it myself if I were them. Ryan has gone apostate, what a tragedy, how could he throw his life away when the end is so near, I'll sure miss him. Shunning as a Witness is done more as a reflex, you just treat a person as if they are dead and gone. You start to refer to them in the past tense. You don't try to torment them with you silence, you just write them off as dead and the silence follows as a consequence.

From my perspective this felt like an itch that stayed around no matter how you much you scratched it. New friendships did nothing to assuage the feeling. Keeping active didn't help. It was on my mind when I woke up in the morning and when I went to bed at night. I felt so alone, so isolated, and also so angry at the unfairness of it all. I felt that I was not in this position by choice but by being put into an impossible situation. I started to post things just in the hopes of getting somebody from the other side to break the silence. I also resumed posting updates about music I was making and my life in general in hopes that I could get some people to respond, but I met with very little success. I was, after all, gone from their world even though I was living in the same apartment where I had lived for the previous five years.

**I don't want to be what I am**

**Fri, 17 Sep 2004 19:15:56 +0000**

Yeah, I know, I said that I wasn't going to update this journal anymore but I came to a realization today and I'm writing it down here because it's relevant

to this journal and that realization is that I don't want to be what I am right now.

**I don't want to be an ex-Witness. I don't want to be a bad associate. I don't want to be worldly. I don't want to be on the outside looking in. I don't want to be out of Nuclear Gopher. I don't want to miss October Ridge. I don't want to be a memory, a pity case, a black sheep. I don't want to be feared, shunned or regarded as a nut case. I needed answers to bolster my faith when I found out things that shattered it. I went to the elders, I prayed, I read the publications, the answers I needed were not there. No matter how badly I wanted to see them, no matter how much I cried and prayed, they weren't there. I had to choose between intellectual honesty and hypocrisy, between the people I loved and being a liar. I couldn't pretend to believe something that I could find no reason to believe and now I have to keep myself away from the people and things I love, in a self-imposed isolation<sup>96</sup> because of it. I'm not disfellowshipped, but I feel like I am. I care about people, I don't want to make them nervous but I miss them so badly. Reed, Robbie, Rhett, Anna, Ian, Jana, Hiromi, Dad, Diana, Julie, Angel, Jessica, Nick, Ed, Ryan, Caleb, Ezra, Bethany, Chad, Mindy, Anthony, Rebekkah, Shay, Josh, Eric, Erik, Rick, James, Jennifer, John, Candy, John, Cindy, Nicole, Nick, Mike, Jake, Ron and anybody else I'm forgetting at this moment... I miss you, I sincerely wish I could still believe in the religion I used to share with you, I hate being out here. If anybody ever wants to say hello, to let me know if they miss me too, I'm at [tastyrerun@gmail.com](mailto:tastyrerun@gmail.com).**

### **Robbie**

i miss you more than i can express and i dearly dearly love you.

that could never change,

your lil sis.

### **Ryan**

Thanks Rob. You're the best little sis a guy could ever ask for. :-)

Ry

On September 25th, the day of October Ridge, instead of attending and watching my brothers and sister play music with their bands I elected to stay away, not sure I'd be welcomed. Instead I met a girl whom I had been corresponding with over the Internet for coffee. Her name was Esther and although I didn't mention her in my online journal, I did make a note of our first date in my day planner. I'm glad I at least did that. She turned out to be significant.

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<sup>96</sup> Self-imposed because I stopped calling people too for fear of upsetting them but also imposed upon me by the fact that they ceased contacting me as well

## **Propaganda**

**Mon, 27 Sep 2004 19:11:50 +0000**

Sounds like the Ridge was lots of fun. Sorry I missed it. Lots and lots of sorry.

I was going through my old service bag a coupla weeks ago and came across the June 22, 2000 Awake magazine entitled "Should you believe everything you hear?". The articles from the issue are actually on the WTS website<sup>97</sup>. Anyhow, I thought the article was interesting and I looked up the quotation from researchers Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson and discovered that they were social psychology professors and it was a quote from a book called "Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion". I went onto Amazon and ordered the book and I'm just finishing up reading it. It is an extremely interesting read, showing how controlled studies and experiments have been used to figure out why various persuasion techniques work from politics to sales pitches to religion. It breaks down and explains the various levers that people and groups can use to persuade you of things, whether it's buying a blender or joining a cult. It's easily one of the most interesting and enlightening books I've read in a while. It definitely makes me more conscious of when somebody is appealing to my emotions or attempting to replace logic with fallacy in an attempt to persuade me of something. Good good book...

## **October Ridge**

**Thu, 30 Sep 2004 19:08:07 +0000**

I was not at October Ridge and I am not writing to whine about it, to say how much I miss everybody or to discuss any of the reasons I wasn't there. I am posting simply to say how thrilled I am that everybody had such an incredible time, that the energy and enthusiasm was contagious and that the love was flowing. I've been reading peoples thoughts and I can't help but be moved by what the Mathenias wrote, the high they got out of being there, sharing in the music and the friendship. Something that they, and Mindy, commented on, about feeling young. About how people reach a certain age and responsibility sets in, they stop being fun, they stop enjoying themselves, life becomes repetitive and somewhat burdensome. Some people spend the rest of their lives looking backwards. When I got married at 19 after spending the majority

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<sup>97</sup> [http://www.watchtower.org/library/g/2000/6/22/article\\_01.htm](http://www.watchtower.org/library/g/2000/6/22/article_01.htm)



of my time in the preceding 4 years writing and recording music for the then fledgling Nuclear Gopher Cheese Factory I had no idea that life did that to you. I had no idea that people just dropped the creativity, the energy, settled in and lived out the string. I was shocked to learn that was normal. It scared me to death. It terrified me that growing up meant no music, watching instead of making movies, fulfilling responsibilities. I fought against it with everything at my disposal. At the time the main thing I had at my disposal was Nuclear Gopher. I put it on the web, I spent money and time I didn't have on it. I was determined to shepherd myself through that part of my life and maintain my energy and creativity. My life is so different now from anything I would have imagined it would be, but I still have my fire, my creativity, my love for people, art, ideas. I've learned how to be an adult and still a kid. I got exactly what I wanted out of NG. I have never been happier that I gave my time to Nuclear Gopher and music, however, than I am today. Rhett and I formed a band almost 20 years ago. We started a label 15 years ago. It gave some of our talented Witness friends a place to have their voice and helped to inspire our incredibly talented brother Reed and sister Robbie to go out and make incredible music. So many incredible people have taken this basic idea, that it's OK to create and still be a Witness but it's NOT OK to stagnate, and ran with it and it's so beautiful. It's not about music, it's about staying alive, about retaining personal identity, about showing love to others and sharing who you are. When I was a kid, I learned the power of art and music from my brother Rhett. When I faced the loss of it I poured myself into Nuclear Gopher to save myself. Reed and Robbie took the cue and helped create a bonified "scene" with SP3!, Kloey and now Daytrip and Pop Riveter. The Internet helped other bands and creative loving people find each other. The Paro's gave the scene a home at October Ridge and people in other states are benefiting. It's humbling and staggering to me that all of this beautiful energy was waiting to just be given an outlet and I'm honored to have played a role in the early days of it, grateful to everybody who is still expanding it and appreciative for all I have learned from all of you. Nuclear Gopher is no longer mine it really never was. I'm not even on the inside of the scene or the Witnesses anymore. Still, I feel as if I have helped play a part in the development of something larger and more powerful than I could have ever imagined and I will always be grateful to have gotten to do that. I'm glad the Witness kids feel free to love and create, I'm glad that Rhett was there to play a part in it this year and whether I am ever there again or not I can't help but read about OR and think that it represents just about the greatest thing I have ever played any role in... rock on. Rock. On.

**CD Release Party December 10 @ Manhattan Loft**  
**Tue, 23 Nov 2004 19:00:27 +0000**

I will be having a CD release party for my new album "The Context" on December 10th at Manhattan Loft on the UofM East Campus. It's a nice place, clean, well lit, cheery. I'll be starting to play sometime later, between 9 and 10 or so I figure. Manhattan Loft is around the corner from Oak Street Cinema on Washington Ave SE. The street address is 802 Washington Ave SE. Anybody who wishes to come hear me play and/or pick up a copy of my CD is invited and appreciated.

**gotta agree...**

I got a fortune cookie today that said:

Your family is one of nature's masterpieces.

I gotta agree there...

**tomorrow shoulda been a big deal**  
**Thu, 09 Dec 2004 18:56:54 +0000**

For years and years and years I have made music. For years and years and years I have not done it alone. Then I went through a change of sorts. I learned things that changed my mind about things. Important things. The (admittedly unhealthy) relationship I was in ended. My friends were forced to distance themselves from me. I wound up in a precarious "outside" position I never envisioned. I kept some things. My cats. My apartment. My optimistic outlook on life. My love for other people. Music.

Music gets you through things, makes things bearable sometimes. I wrote music during this change. I recorded it. I released it to the world on tuesday. The new Rift magazine has an ad for my CD in it. My release party is tomorrow night at Manhattan Loft after 9:00. It's only the second time I've ever played live alone even if it is the 17th live performance I've been a part of over the last 15 years. It is also the first time that the crowd is likely to be strangers, college students I've never met, people looking for beer and entertainment. For

all my NGP past and recording experience I have little preparation for this and I'm surprisingly unsure of myself. It'll be me, my new guitar and amp, my laptop and a list of songs. Hrmmm. The heartburn I am suffering right now does not do the fear justice.

I'm not sure if it scares me more to play for people I don't know or to NOT be playing for the Witness friends I miss so badly. I think Rhett, Reed and Robbie will swing by and who know who else might. I sure hope they do.

#### **The Context Release Show**

**Sun, 12 Dec 2004 18:53:06 +0000**

Well, for something I got myself all worked up about that was fairly anti-climactic. The turnout was sparse to say the least. Robbie & Hiromi, Reed & Jana, Dave & Kirsten, Jon, Jenny, Esther, Clint & Beth, Matt & his friend who I forget, Syd, a few of stragglers who came in for pizza from off the street... That was about it, I probably played for about 18 people plus the kitchen staff. Not exactly a bang up job of promo by Heather. Next one I'm doing my own promotion so a few people actually show up who AREN'T my friends and relatives.

I think I played well. That much I'm happy about. I felt comfortable. I think I'm going to do fine in future shows.

After the weak response to my show and nine months in which my only interactions with Witnesses were arguments I decided to start focusing on my new life and put an end to the LiveJournal for once and for all.

#### **LJ Closed**

**Tue, 14 Dec 2004 18:49:14 +0000**

It's been a nice run but I'm done here. This LJ is closed, all previous posts are now private. I can be reached at my usual email address.

Peace.

Ryan



### **Part 3: Flutter**

*"I wish I could write around*

*this fluttering pen*

*however words fail me"*

*- From the song "Flutter", recorded by Purple Triangles, 1992*

On December 15th, 2004, the day after I closed my LiveJournal, I started a new blog over at RyanSutter.net to write about my religious thoughts without offending or stumbling anybody. It turned out, I had a lot of thoughts to write about.

### **Reason and Faith**

**Fri, 17 Dec 2004 07:02:18 +0000**

I remember taking a philosophy class back in high school in which we discussed the nature of faith. I could not, for the life of me, understand what the teacher was getting on about when he talked about the question of whether faith needed to have an evidentiary starting place. As his example he talked about Noah's Ark and asked if it would change or strengthen a person's belief in the Bible if the ark were found. He then asked if the fact that finding Noah's ark might strengthen faith means that the faith was weak in the first place.

I didn't understand this argument because to me faith without evidence, without reason, was inconceivable. I've never been capable of believing in something simply because I wished to believe in it. I have always needed to have a starting place for my faith and to have solid reasons on which to build it. I'm not good at believing things because they are comforting or because they are nice things to believe. I never have been and frankly I was trained from a young age not to be by none other than my religion, the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Watchtower Society has a book called "Reasoning From the Scriptures" which is basically the guidebook for discussions when going door to door. You can look up a topic and read what it has to say on the topic, get quotes and scriptural citations and basically work from there. On the topic of Faith it has this to say:

"True faith is not credulity, that is, a readiness to believe something without sound evidence or just because a person wants it to be so. Genuine faith requires basic or fundamental knowledge, acquaintance with evidence, as well as heartfelt appreciation of what that evidence indicates." - Reasoning From the Scriptures, page 129

This definition of faith is interesting. It specifically mentions that we should have sound evidence for what we believe and that we should not believe things simply because we want them to be so. I wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment. Think about it. If we simply believe whatever we want to believe that is no way to find "truth". I can believe all day that I have an invisible friend hanging out with me but it doesn't make him real. If he started moving things around, fluffing the pillows and pouring me coffee I might have something to go on because evidence would be provided but otherwise the belief would simply be wishful thinking or credulity. So, I can definitely agree in principle with the statement that there is a difference between faith and credulity. The big question then becomes one of evidence. Where does evidence end and faith begin? This is where I differ in my opinion of what the Society says here. They first suggest the need for "sound evidence" but their definition of genuine faith only calls for "basic and fundamental knowledge" and "acquaintance with evidence" along with "heartfelt appreciation of what that evidence indicates". I have always taken this to mean that sound evidence would lead one to the truth and that faith would enhance ones appreciation for it. Evidence and reason should not then contradict faith but rather bolster it. It seems that perhaps for all these years I have been reading this wrong. I have always thought that you were supposed to get all the knowledge and evidence you could and then allow faith to fill in the gaps where logic, reason, science and the senses can't operate. What it actually appears to be suggesting, however, is that you should learn the rough outline, the basics, the general facts and then use your heart to interpret them or at least to provide you with an appreciation for them.

At what point though does a person of faith stop acquiring evidence and reason and start exercising faith? What constitutes a basic fundamental understanding of the evidence? How is a person supposed to know that their heart is being guided to an accurate conclusion? What is "sound evidence"?

In an effort to answer these questions for this essay I attempted to look up the topic of Science in the Reasoning book and found that there was no heading for that topic. I am also currently unable to find my Watchtower Library CD-ROM so I will simply state what I learned as a member of the organization. I learned that science and reason were to be trusted up to the point where they continued to agree with the Bible. The Bible, being the inspired word of God is inerrant, therefore if the Bible says one thing but science says another, it is at this point that reason and faith part ways. It is at this point that the person of faith chooses to believe the Bible rather than the evidence.

I have had first hand experience with this shearing point between reason and faith on multiple occasions in conversations with my father, the elders and other Jehovah's Witnesses and Christians of other faiths. I have discussed the evidence, for example, that the flood of Noah's day could not possibly have been a global deluge. The evidence is completely overwhelming and consistent and I will discuss it in a different post on this site at a later date. Suffice it to say that when the evidence and lines of reasoning conclusively point to a conclusion that contradicts a Bible account the evidence is then rejected as a trick of Satans or as the "wisdom of men". Never mind logic, evidence, reason or any of those things at this point. Satan is in control of the world and can make anything appear however he wants it to, therefore if it contradicts with the Bible, it is a deception and false. Additionally, Jehovah can do anything and therefore if it's not Satan's fault that the evidence appears a particular way then Jehovah must have arranged it that way. The reason for this does not need to be understood as God will reveal it all in his due time if we only have faith.

For me, sound evidence means what it sounds like. Evidence that is sound. Sound, to my mind means that it will stand up to inspection, that it is logically correct, based on observable reality and capable of withstanding critical analysis. Critical analysis does not produce ideas, but it tests them to see if they make sense, if they are correct. No evidence can be called "sound evidence" unless it can withstand critical analysis. Critical analysis, therefore, is an essential component of building faith if said faith is going to lead a person to an accurate conclusion because it is with critical analysis that one determines what is "sound evidence". When one determines that this criteria is to be applied to everything EXCEPT the Bible then one is no longer basing faith on evidence, they are basing it on "wishful thinking" or wanting it to be

so. If there is a shearing point at which the Bible trumps evidence then there is no distinction between faith and credulity because ultimately one has to make the decision that the Bible is God's word. That decision is an act of credulity if not based on evidence and if evidence points in the other direction... well, you can see the conflict I hope. In order to accept the idea that faith requires evidence, then one cannot determine which evidence they accept and reject without resorting to credulity. One can only take the evidence as far as it leads and then use faith to make educated guesses about what it all means even if that means determining that some parts of the Bible cannot possibly be literally true. That is what I always thought I was doing as a Witness until I learned that I simply wasn't looking closely enough at the evidence.

Basing my faith on reason was what I was taught to do. It was the thing that distinguished faith from credulity. I still believe it is correct and I do not think there is any other way to go about it.

**Mon, 20 Dec 2004 09:38:46 +0000**

Yesterday was lots of fun and lots of work. Esther, Sydney and I went to record stores and dropped off copies of The Context. It's now available at Treehouse, Let It Be, Roadrunner, Aardvark, Electric Fetus and Know Name. Cheapo is up next but we have to wait until after the holidays. Es has been remarkably helpful with keeping everything arranged. She has put together a database of industry contacts including venues, radio stations and the like. She helped me put together a press kit for submission to radio stations that looks phenomenal and last night we made a bunch of them. They have a one sheet, a promo copy of the CD and a business card in these clear folders and they look really smart. Now, I realize that you can have the smartest looking press kit in the world and without good music it's pointless but I'm pretty happy with my music so it was pretty fun making the press kit and pretty satisfying looking at it afterwards. All in all, a good day.

**2005 Is Coming Up**

**Mon, 20 Dec 2004 18:25:01 +0000**

I have a lot of creative projects going on now and I am really excited about them all. For the first time in my life I am able to devote exactly as much energy and focus to them as I like and I'm only now starting to realize what I



can do with that freedom. I have a CD just released but it is pretty much just a trial run to learn the ropes of what I am going to do with my next CD. Infrastructure in place, commence rocking.

I am working a ton right now, a full-time job, a part-time job and my label. I would probably be overwhelmed with all of it if not for the Big Es who is a marvel at making my life better. She is quite the driven little bugger, nearly as bad (good) as I am.

**Mon, 20 Dec 2004 18:25:08 +0000**

The weather is hideous today. All the roads are covered with ice, it took me 20 minutes to clear my windows of accumulated ice this morning. Yuck.

**shocking things you probably don't know about me<sup>98</sup>**

**Wed, 22 Dec 2004 09:29:31 +0000**

First things first. I'm sick, sick to death, of being a hypocrite. I have no capacity for it anymore. If somebody asks me straight out for information I will give it to them even if I prefer not to. Up to this point, however, I have avoided volunteering certain information. I have been thinking about it though and I realize that this is wrong. This is misrepresenting who I really am to others, allowing them to maintain an illusion that is not true. I can't live like that forever. Eventually the reality will become apparent so I've decided to just cut to the chase. This is the chase. Prepare to cut to it.

First off, as I've stated repeatedly to others, I no longer believe in God or Jehovah's Witnesses. I leave certain areas open, however and am still open to new evidence to overturn others. There are multiple levels of belief and here is where I currently stand on each:

Does God exist? Unknown and unknowable, but possible.

Does Jehovah, as depicted in the Bible, exist? No.

Is the Bible the product of divine revelation? No. It is a human document.

Did God create the universe? Unknown and unknowable, but possible.

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<sup>98</sup> Writing this post was, to put it bluntly, terrifying. I had developed some new "worldly" parts to my life and I was happy, but I hadn't shared them with anybody because there was no communication going on between myself and my old Witness associates. I knew, however, that some still lurked at my blog and that anything I posted here would be reported among my old social circles. I felt extremely liberated after this post.

Did God create humans separate from the other animals? No.  
Is the Genesis creation account true? No.  
Did humans evolve? Yes.  
Was there a global flood as described in Genesis? No.  
Did Jesus exist? Possibly, but inconclusive.  
Are the gospels reliable historical documents? No.  
Is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society God's organization on earth today?  
They're just another religion, meaning well but following the writings of  
humans (the Bible). No god is involved.  
Is religion a force for good? Sometimes but on the whole, no.

I know it's tough to read those words for people who love me, but I believe those are factual statements and I cannot pretend otherwise. There is simply no reliable evidence that leads to any other conclusion.

In part because I now feel free to make certain decisions about how I live my life for myself, I have indeed begun to do so. I will now reveal some particularly non-Witness ones...

The second thing I want to reveal here in this little earth-shatterer of a post is that I have a girlfriend now. Her name is Esther. She's not a Witness and shares my disbelief in God and the supernatural. She's smart as a whip, kind, loving, has phenomenal taste in just about everything and I'm happy as a clam in mud to have found her. She and I went together on a road trip to Green Bay WI to see the Vikings play the Packers and stayed overnight there in Schwanno WI the night before the game. Her only serious flaw is that she's a Packer fan<sup>99</sup>.

A third thing that some will find shocking is that I have grown a beard<sup>100</sup>. I have done so for two reasons. First, I hate shaving and second, I look good with a beard. Oh sure, it also helps keep my face warm, but those are the general reasons. I've always wanted a beard, now I have one.

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99 A failing I have yet to rectify in her, the little scamp...

100 Witnesses don't wear beards. From the May 1, 1968 Watchtower: "Today Christian ministers, like the early Christians, are concerned with neatness and cleanness, but they strive to dress inconspicuously, so that their appearance does not in any way detract from the dignity or the effectiveness of the message they bear. (2 Cor. 6:3, 4) In recent years in many lands a beard or long hair on a man attracts immediate notice and may, in the minds of the majority, classify such a person undesirably with extremists or as rebels against society. God's ministers want to avoid making any impression that would take attention away from their ministry or hinder anyone from listening to the truth. They know that people are watching true Christians very critically and that to a great extent they judge the entire congregation and the good news by the minister's appearance as a representative of the congregation. In paradise restored on earth it would not be out of order if men returned to wearing beards, in perfect fashion, like Adam in Eden."

Yet another thing I'd like to point out is that I have become somewhat politically active. I not only voted this year but I participated in a "get out the vote" effort<sup>101</sup>. I have Wellstone and Kerry / Edwards bumper stickers on my car. I am not nationalistic or patriotic but I do believe that any improvements that happen here have to happen because of us, not a deity, and so I'll do whatever I can.

I have also, as an aside, become a vegetarian. I'm not sure why somebody else needs to die just so I can eat something tasty. I know you can be a Witness and a vegetarian, but I also reject the Biblical idea that the animals were just put here so we could have dominion over them. I think that's an extremely arrogant and irresponsible idea.

A final shocking tidbit is that last night I bought a new pipe. It's a decent little briar-wood pipe, nothing terribly spectacular. It's the second pipe I've purchased. Here is me with the first one while in Schwanno WI with Esther:



*An admittedly bearded Ryan Sutter smokes a pipe while contemplating atheist evolutionary biology on a weekend trip with his worldly girlfriend.*

This is as bad as it gets folks.

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<sup>101</sup> Witnesses don't vote. From the May 15, 1964 Watchtower: "In no country do Jehovah's witnesses take part in politics. They are not of this world. (John 17:14) Therefore they do not take part in voting at elections."

I had to buy a new one because I inadvertently wrecked the first one by making a few novice pipe smoking mistakes (puffing too fast, smoking it outdoors, bad tamping, etc). Now, the question one might ask at this point is why, oh why, would I even think about smoking a pipe in the first place? Don't I know smoking is terribly bad for me? Don't I know that I'm risking life and limb? Why take up a filthy disgusting habit? Well, I'll tell ya. When I was a little kid my grandpa Clarence smoked a pipe and I loved the smell. It was warm and sweet and lovely. My uncle Steve also smokes a pipe and the few times I have encountered him while he was doing it and I have again found that unlike cigarettes the smell is delicious and wonderful. I've always wanted to try smoking a pipe because it smells so delicious and because it seems so calming and relaxing. When the opportunity arose to pick up a pipe in Schwanno I decided to give it a try and I found I enjoyed it. You don't inhale anything, just puff, taste and blow out. It's not polluting your body at all, it's simply tasting smoke and it tastes yummy. The argument that "smoking's still smoking" doesn't hold water. Smoking a pipe is no more dangerous or unhealthy than eating red meat or drinking alcohol and in fact some studies have shown that moderate pipe smokers (fewer than 4 bowls a day) tend to live longer on average than non-smokers. It's relaxing to take a small amount of smoke into your mouth, taste it for a second and blow it away and being calm and relaxed is a good thing for your body. As long as you don't inhale, you aren't bringing tars and carcinogens into your lungs in the process. Yes, smoking a pipe is in some ways less healthy than not smoking one but so is eating meat or overindulging in alcohol. Just like red wine, a little in moderation does not significantly increase health risks, has certain health benefits and may actually result in a longer life. So, it's not a filthy, disgusting habit, I'm not particularly endangering my health (so long as it's kept in moderation, which it is) and I'm doing so because it's calming, enjoyable and smells nice.

So, to sum up:

- Don't believe in god, inspiration of the Bible or the Society as god's channel
- Have "worldly" girlfriend
- Have grown beard
- Politically active
- Vegetarian

- Occasionally smoke a pipe

I think that's all the news that's fit to print. There. You can't say I'm not being honest here... we're all just going to have to learn to co-exist somehow...

### **Anonymous**

I find it interesting that you can spout off on freedom of choice, but yet you can't reply to an observation made by one who knew you<sup>102</sup>... So, whatever happened to your wife?<sup>103</sup> and for the matter.. what happened to your mind?....

I've seen inside the dark shadow of your mind; have viewed the sacred fears you hide; Is what you chose the truth inside? or is it just another mask to hide?

### **Jenny**

Unlike some cowards who like to spew their vile judgmental filth and then decline to leave their names I am first going to say who I am and THEN what I have to say. My name is Jenny and some of you who read this may or may not know me<sup>104</sup>. It doesn't really matter. Either way here is what I have to say:

According to the ideals of Jehovah's Witnesses, judging people is wrong. When scriptures are read at meetings and conventions about how you are all supposed to love your enemies, I am sure that you dutifully write it down in your notes and then proceed to completely ignore it. Since Ryan is now officially disassociated from the organization<sup>105</sup> and has been saying things in opposition to Watchtower publications this now places him in the category of "enemy" and/ or "apostate", correct? It is shameful, reprehensible, and sickening to me that you can so freely spew your judgmental scathing hate, which in and of itself is a sin, as long as you leave out your name. Would you commenters be saying this at the Kingdom Hall? out in field service? at a convention? I don't think so. These are only things you say when you are among friends behind closed doors in your home or driving in your car.

I don't know what makes me more repulsed. The cowardice, or the hypocritical hatred. And yes, for those of you who would deny this label I am placing on you, you are hypocrites. By labeling yourself as a Jehovah's Witness you automatically take on the responsibility of conforming to the tenets of said organization. Nobody is perfect, but this license you give yourselves clearly does not stop at anonymous posts on someone's blog. You judge people and breed contempt in your hearts. You also clearly don't know him well enough to even be up to date on his marriage status, so what do you have to say about anything at all?

I for one am proud to say that Ryan is my friend, one of the best I've ever had in fact. I am not relinquishing an important friendship because an organization of people tell me to (like a lemming would if the situation so

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102 This poster had made a previous comment on this thread that I had cut out, written a reply to, and posted on the front of my blog. When they saw their post disappear they assumed I was avoiding it. The actual comment and response will be coming up in a bit here...

103 This person was clearly not aware of my previous LiveJournal blog in which the subject of Amanda had been dealt with repeatedly

104 My brave defender here is my good friend Jenny Hayes, a second generation Witness who was both good friends with Amanda and even lived with Amanda and I for several months.

105 Technically I wasn't officially disassociated yet, but it wasn't much longer

called for it). I have never, aside from my childhood years, called myself a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, I have never been baptized, and have never been accepted among you socially. I am not putting anything on the line by voicing my continuing friendship with Ryan. He has, however, been forced to sacrifice relationships dear to him. An entire lifetime of his friendships and family relationships have just been erased and you commenters show no loyalty to Jehovah, no alliance with the holy spirit by saying the horrible and disgusting things you've said. If you think it doesn't pain him to do what his conscience so dictates you are wrong and stupid. Look at the facts before you push your uninvolved cowardly selves and opinions all over someone else.

This is exactly the kind of behaviour that will continue to keep me at home every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday. This is also pretty much all I have to say. I could go on some more but it would just be more of the same.

### **tasty rerun**

Oh but I did respond to the observation you made. I responded on the very front page of my journal. I wanted it to get more attention than just a comment down here. The short answer is my wife treated me and my kid like crap for years and left me at her first available opportunity, which was nearly a year ago and long before I ever had a girlfriend. You may have known me, but apparently you didn't know me well at all. I was married to a negative pessimistic selfish paranoid black cloud of a person who once wrote that she wanted to "kick the shit" out of my kid<sup>106</sup>. After she left I actually had a visit from child protection services over some of the negligence he experienced under her care<sup>107</sup>. It's a good thing she's gone and she would have been gone regardless of my religious deconversion. She was a bad person to be with and I'm glad she left, but she was the one who did the leaving<sup>108</sup>. I simply don't want her to come back. Ever.

Where is my mind? Exactly where it always has been. I'm the sanest and stablest, happiest and most genuinely in touch with the world that I've ever been. I'm in a loving monogamous relationship with an intelligent caring girl, I'm working hard, reading, studying, making music... In short my life is exactly as it always was, my mind is exactly what it always was, just minus one huge set of falsehoods. I'm saner, not less sane. There is no mask, no confusion, just me.

Tell me, oh mystery former-friend, where do you get off telling somebody they disgust you when you don't even take the time to get to know a situation? If your wife was begging you to buy her pot one week (something I vehemently declined) and leaving you the next to take off for another state, hugely relieved because she hated everything in your life (including your family, friends and child), what would you do? If you found out that there were serious deceptions and falsehoods in something you believed and you took it to the elders and they simply shrugged and said "Well, you might be right" and everybody else refused to even hear what you had to say, what would you do? If you were faced with choosing

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106 After Amanda moved out I discovered a notebook in which she had written a long screed about how much she hated me, her parents, my son and just about everybody we knew as well as stating that when she worked out at the gym she fantasized that when she kicked the heavy bag she was kicking the shit out of my son.

107 When she was supposed to put him on the school bus in the morning after I went to work, she instead left him out there by himself and went to sleep. One morning he went out too late for the bus and wound up spending several hours standing outside waiting for a bus that never came, afraid to go back into the house to ask Amanda for a ride to school. He was 8 years old at the time.

108 I did broach the subject, admittedly

between the truth and "the truth", between living your life pretending, wearing a mask, or living it in the open, what would you do?

What I do know is that you're more than willing to pass moral judgments on a situation about which you have absolutely no knowledge, you are willing to attack me for pointing out errors but not attack the errors themselves and you do all of this under a veil of anonymity. I find that fairly repugnant.

### **Anonymous**

I'm sorry for what you went through with your former wife, I did not know... And just FYI, I am not a Jehovah Witness, just someone who used to know you a while ago<sup>109</sup>. It's just really hard to see someone who once loved and held dear to their heart their faith turn so viciously against it..

### **tasty rerun**

I loved the people in my faith. I still do. However, love and faith had nothing to do with why I was a Witness. I was a Witness because I thought it was actually true. There is nothing vicious in anything I have to say right now. It is, if anything, coldly analytical.

Let me state this very clearly. I would never had become one of Jehovah's Witnesses if I hadn't been deceived by their publications into believing that they were correct. When I discovered that they were, in fact, wrong it was without a doubt the most sickening moment of my life. I felt cheated, lied to, a victim. I had been sold a false bill of goods. My membership of the organization was never about a feeling in my heart, the feeling in my heart was as a result of believing that I had the truth. Can you understand that there is nothing vicious about dissecting a false argument or deceptive statement? Vicious implies malice and that is not present in my heart. I have hurt. Yes. I have loss. Yes. I have a desire to expose the deceptions so that others don't fall victim to them, yes. I have maintained my love for my "brothers and sisters" even as they have refused to listen to me, have treated me like an evil person and have accused me of terrible motives all because I discovered something I didn't even want to. This is a classic case of shooting the messenger. I don't like being lied to, but I'm not vicious. I miss the people I love and I'm doing my best to explain why I had to make this decision to leave.

### **the most disturbing thing ever**

**Tue, 28 Dec 2004 19:16:18 +0000**

I saw the single most sick, twisted, disgusting, repulsive, offensive and brutal movie I have ever seen recently. No, it's not Kill Bill (I own Volume 1 & 2 on DVD). It's not Ju-On, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre or any of a number of brutal bloody gorefeasts I could name, most of which I have seen. No, this

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<sup>109</sup> I do not know who this person is to this day, although I suspect they may have actually been a Jehovah's Witness who didn't wish to admit it

movie was far worse than any other I've personally witnessed (that means you Dawn of the Dead)... The Passion of the Christ.

This movie is vile.

This movie is sick.

This movie is disgusting.

And to make it worse, this movie is pointless. It's not beautiful, moving or anything else. It's simply an exercise in brutality. It neither teaches nor illuminates. It neither moves nor enlightens. It simply makes you want to puke, shut it off, leave, you name it.

My mother told me to watch it. My mother. The born-again Christian. She found it moving. This link (<http://news.statesmanjournal.com/article.cfm?i=75908>) contains the following:

"The violence is necessary to understand the sacrifice Jesus made," First Family pastor Jerry Johnston says. His Baptist church has rented out a half-dozen theaters in Kansas City, Kan., and has reserved auditoriums Friday night for children 11 and older.

Johnston concedes they'll be disturbed by the violence. "I hope they're disturbed enough to make their peace with Jesus."

Disturbed enough to make their peace with Jesus? This is the sickest thing I've ever heard if this man has actually seen the movie. I was never that kind of Christian, I was a Jehovah's Witness, but man... What is wrong with Christians that they think this movie is a good thing? This thing should have been rated NC-17.

What kills me the most is that the majority of archeologists and critical Bible scholars don't even believe this actually happened. Archeology has already shown that it's almost certainly not history, it's mythology with the same level of reality as Jason and Argonauts. It was invented decades after the real Jesus (if he even existed, which is highly doubtful) was dead. Making a graphic depiction of this story and then subjecting children to it is simply unnecessary,



offensive and highly disturbing. Mel Gibson and every single Christian who took their children to see this movie ought to be ashamed.

**Wed, 29 Dec 2004 08:19:54 +0000**

1. Grab the nearest book.
2. Open the book to page 123.
3. Find the fifth sentence.
4. Post the text of the sentence in your journal along with these instructions.
5. Don't search around and look for the "coolest" book you can find. Do what's actually next to you.

"And the third thing we've learned is that Paul's gospel was his very own construction." - Who Wrote the New Testament? by Burton Mack

**watcher of the skies**

**Wed, 05 Jan 2005 09:06:35 +0000**

Last night the plan was to go to an open mike at the Chatterbox and play a little mini set to try to get a gig. The plan Monday had also been to go to an open mike. The plan tonight? An open mike. The odd thing about the last two open mikes this week is that we didn't, in fact, go. Monday night I was exhausted. Last night Es was sick. However, last night I was feeling good... VERY good. The cause of this good feelingness? I. Recorded.

I laid down the core of what will be the opening track on my new album last night in a rather invigorating 4 hour recording session. I finished the rest of it in my head this morning so I know what to do either tonight or tomorrow when I return to the studio. I'm really excited because it sounds FANTASTIC. I recorded 15 tracks last night and even got to use the Mellotron sound from Genesis' song "Watcher of the Skies". The Variax is absolutely incredible, especially when used with the GM-200. I've never been so happy with my guitar sounds before. I got to use one of the Les Paul models and the Martin D-28 coupled with 4 different amp combos and a light chorus to create an

amazing wall of sound. Combined with the Mellotron, the bass and the vocals I'm just thrilled. It's loud, it's rich and it was done with Esther asleep in the next room. Apartment studios NEED equipment like this... and a good bottle of single-malt scotch. Preferably a 15-year but a 12 will do....

I get to really put the Rode to the test on the intro to the song that hasn't been recorded yet. The vocals sound great on the song as it is but the intro is nothing BUT vocals so we'll just have to see how good this thing can make my voice sound when there is nothing else on the recording. "Songs of Bo Redoubt" has begun!!!

As the new year began, I was excited. I had started recording a new album, my relationship with Esther was still going well, I was feeling as if I was starting to get the hang of my new life.

For all intents and purposes, I should have started to feel alright with my new life. However, I couldn't shake a sense of confusion, a feeling that I was really just going through the motions. The life I was living felt like it belonged to somebody else. I felt as if I was acting, going through the motions of my life. It still felt like I was in limbo between my old life as a Witness and my new life in the world. It had been nearly a year and this feeling had not gone away. One day I had enough and I decided it was time to take the final step in leaving, hoping against hope that this final step would bring me closer to feeling like a functioning person again. I had read enough and examined enough to know that answers to my questions were not forthcoming. I had been shunned long enough to know that my friends and family were not going to have anything to do with me regardless of whether I had officially withdrawn my membership in the Organization or not. So, I decided to take that step and to formally disassociate myself from membership in the Watchtower Society. I also wrote a letter to my family, informing them of my decision.

## **Disassociation**

**Mon, 17 Jan 2005 07:46:41 +0000**

It is now official. I wrote a letter on Friday, 1/14/2005 and put it in the mailbox at the Lakeville Kingdom Hall disassociating myself from the organization known as Jehovah's Witnesses. I did so in order that there would be no confusion. They teach things that are provably false and I can not condone any group that can do such a thing while claiming to have "The Truth". They do not.

"The church tells me that the earth is flat, but I know that it is round, for I have seen its shadow on the moon. And I trust a shadow more than I trust the church." - Ferdinand Magellan

Well said sir, well said.

### **Anonymous**

good for you. if it weren't for the fact that said action creates problems for JW's that i still have good friendships with, whom i know would still be friends if i disassociated myself, i would gleefully kick the cult to the curb myself. until then, i'll keep the cult/ church out of my life and enjoy living my life.

### **tasty rerun**

Yeah, it does cause problems. I know quite a few Witnesses in the position of not believing it and yet staying for the friendships as it sounds like you are doing. I don't seem to be able to do that because I just can't keep my mouth shut if I think something is wrong. Oh well... If people are small-minded enough to reject me because I refuse to go against my conscience and reality there is little I can do about it

### **fear, hatred and bigotry**

**Mon, 17 Jan 2005 14:23:36 +0000**

When a person follows their conscience and their mind and the evidence and information they learn about and comes to a conclusion that they do not believe in the Bible or the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society they are, according to the book *Insight on the Scriptures* published by the Society, a part of the anti-christ and are not to be spoken to<sup>110</sup>. They are branded apostate and are feared, shunned, pitied, rejected and cut off from the people they had loved. That, I suppose, now applies to me and I think it's immoral.

My conscience tells me that it's wrong to use logical fallacies or misquotations so I can't support Creation Scientists, whose arguments are based on fallacy and misquotation. Witnesses are Creation Scientists.

My conscience tells me that it's wrong to ignore evidence that doesn't fit your predetermined conclusion so I can't call the Bible infallible when it errs about science, history or chronology. Witnesses believe in the infallibility of the Bible.

My conscience tells me that I must put all claims to the test, especially those of divine inspiration since they are some pretty major claims, and to be honest about the results of the test even if they are not the results I wanted so I can't

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110 "Such ones willfully abandoning the Christian congregation thereby become part of the antichrist. (1Jo 2:18,19) As with the apostate Israelites, destruction is likewise foretold for apostates from the Christian congregation." - *Insight on the Scriptures* under the heading APOSTASY, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society

assume the inspiration of the Bible above or beyond the inspirational claims of other "holy" books or place it's words above physical reality. Witnesses believe everything should be judged by the Bible and the Bible should be judged by nothing<sup>111</sup>.

My conscience tells me that I should love the people I love because of their qualities, their kindness and their personalities so I can't reject my Witness friends and family even if I feel that their beliefs are factually incorrect. Witnesses believe people in my position should not be spoken to<sup>112</sup>.

I am following my conscience to do what is right, what is moral. It is against my conscience to be a Witness because blindly embracing known falsehoods is immoral. I started applying the standards of honest reasoning, logic and evidence, inclusive discussion and consideration of viewpoints without predetermined conclusions. I reached conclusions that shocked me, sickened me, saddened me and destroyed my previous life because I had honestly thought it was correct and found I was wrong. I decided to move on with my life, honestly, with the new information in mind. I see no crime in that, certainly no anti-christ.

To those who say that maybe atheists can't find God for the same reason a thief can't find a policeman<sup>113</sup>, I have this to say. I have looked for God in the Bible, in nature, in myself, in a lot of places and found nothing to validate the conception of the Judeo-Christian idea of Jehovah God, so I have no choice but to not accept that particular god above any other because the evidence for all of them is exactly the same. You can seek as passionately as you want for something, you will not find it if it is not there. Maybe atheists can't find God because he is an invention of a mind unlike their own and they can't fathom belief without evidence. I can't fathom belief without evidence and there is no evidence available that leads anywhere other than where I am so here I am. It's

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111"quoting a text from the Bible in support is evidence enough to prove a point" - Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society

112"... the word apostasy comes from a Greek word that literally means a standing away from but has the sense of desertion, abandonment or rebellion. ... Among the varied causes of apostasy set forth in apostolic warnings were: lack of faith (Heb. 3:12) ... Such ones willfully abandoning the Christian congregation ... become part of the antichrist. (1John 2:18,19) A person who had willfully and formally disassociated himself from the congregation would have matched that description. By deliberately repudiating Gods congregation and by renouncing the Christian way, he would have made himself an apostate. A loyal Christian would not have wanted to fellowship with an apostate. Even if they had been friends ... Scripturally, a person who repudiated Gods congregation became more reprehensible than those in the world. ... John was providing harmonious counsel in directing that Christians were not to receive into their homes one who willfully went out from among them. 2John 10.

John added: For he that says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works. (2John 11) ... John was not urging Christians then to avoid merely warmly greeting (with an embrace, kiss, and conversation) a person who taught falsehood or who renounced the congregation (apostatized). Rather, John was saying that they ought not even greet such an individual with ... a common good-day." - Watchtower magazine, July 15, 1985

113An actual comment that was left on my blog at one point

not a desire to reject God, it's a desire to accept reality and if he's notably absent that needs to be accepted, like it or not. I cannot imagine why I ought to be punished for that or how I could be expected to reach any other conclusion when it is the only one that fits all the evidence

## **Hue and Cry**

**Wed, 19 Jan 2005 06:14:30 +0000**

I'm unimportant  
down southern beach  
and I can  
read the portents  
they're in my teeth  
and I am  
illustrating why this is a  
hue and cry

and I'm not writing about what I have to say  
I'm not singing about you today  
I'm quite unimpressed by you anyway

I'm undiscovered  
and I'm out of reach  
and I am uninvited  
to the class I teach  
and I descend to hell  
through Perkins wishing wells

here I sit and I am illustrating why  
my laughs and fits make this a  
hue and cry  
I'll surrender this on the day that I die

I'm unforgotten  
unforgettable  
I am an illustrative story  
that's missing it's moral  
and though I'm

down the street I am beyond belief

it's a tragedy that who I've come to be  
is someone you could like if doing it were free  
and I will always love you  
as you fear for me

I wish that I could play the piano  
I wish that I could play the drums

**something's disgusting around here...**<sup>114</sup>

**Wed, 19 Jan 2005 14:15:30 +0000**

*I am so digusted [sic] by you right now Ryan, I can't even express it! What happened to your wife & child? You think you're being 'so original and true to yourself' when in actuality your just following along like a mindless lemming because you found a woman who has you by the balls. I guess some things never change- you'll always do what a woman wants you to as long as the freaking is good... You make me absolutely sick.*

This lovely and insanely ignorant post deserved to be given special treatment. I couldn't just allow it languish in obscurity buried in a comment thread so I deleted it and reprinted it here in all it's glory. These anonymously posted words were in response to my "Shocking Things You Don't Know About Me" entry in which I confessed to having a girlfriend.

What moron here seems to believe is that I left my wife and child to go get my freak on. Um, sorry, thanks for playing, but no. I still have joint custody of my son and he and I are getting along great. I'll be seeing him in a couple of hours in fact. Syd's happy, healthy and living at my house just as he always has. As for the wife...

It's true, I had a wife before I had a girlfriend. Two of them in fact. The first, the mother of my son, and the second, who left me as soon as she found out I was having problems with the Witnesses. The same day. A week after she was begging me to buy her pot. This charming and lovely woman put in writing that she dreamed about "kicking the shit" out of me, my young son, her parents

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<sup>114</sup>This is the comment that was mentioned earlier

and just about everybody she ever knew. She hated my family. Hated my friends. Hated my house. Ultimately decided she hated me too despite the fact that I never treated her poorly in our time together. She spent a year begging for a divorce before she left at the first opening. She left behind no friends. She couldn't wait to leave me and good riddance. My son and I are both better off since she left. I liken it to having a tumor removed. Key point though... I didn't do it. She did.

So, Sir or Madam Moron, my wife left me when I should have needed her most, she wanted to physically beat my child and I STILL paid off all her bills and gave her all the furniture. This all happened nearly a year ago. I've known Esther for a few months. I didn't meet or do anything with Esther until I had already gone through my religious deconversion, I didn't follow her in anything, it had nothing to do with my wife, my kid is great and you're an idiot.

It is this kind of ignorant judgmental garbage one expects of people who are unwilling to take the time to learn anything before jumping to their conclusions. Get your info straight before you turn into a sickening judgmental ass. Thanks

### **What Is My Fault, And What Is Not.**

**Thu, 20 Jan 2005 13:23:32 +0000**

As I have always attempted where possible to be an honest and responsible person who owns up to his mistakes I would like to take this opportunity to clear the air about a few things, to accept the blame for the things that are my fault and to deny responsibility for things I am not responsible for. Ahem...

The atoms of radioactive elements break down over time at a predictable rate called a "half life". These elements are found in rocks on our planet and because of the presence of these elements in the rocks the age of the rocks can be determined. This, I would like to point out, is not my fault. I neither created the rocks nor put the elements in them nor discovered the principle of radiation nor caused the atomic breakdown to occur nor established the fundamental laws of the universe that lead to this "clock". I do take responsibility, however, for believing the thousands of competent scientists and researchers and professionals of various faiths, backgrounds and walks of

life who have measured these elements and determined the age of this planet to be approximately 4.55 billion years old. Mea culpa. I believe the rocks are telling the truth when they tell their age seeing as how rocks have little reason to lie.

Sometime in the first billion years of time on this little planet here something started reproducing and adapting. It may have come from space, it may have been created by God, it may have formed through the basic rules of chemistry, but eventually it became big enough to leave little marks, little traces of itself in the oldest of old rocks. This, additionally, is not my fault. I neither put the traces of life in the rocks, nor determined the ages of said rocks nor in any way contributed to the presence of these little reproducing things in the rocks. I deny all responsibility. I do, however, take responsibility for looking at pictures of their traces, reading about how those traces are analyzed and learning about the earliest records of life on this planet. Considering that those records exist I guess I thought it was OK to learn about them. Again. My bad.

Funny thing about reproducing adapting little critters is that they use RNA and DNA to make copies of themselves and the methods that RNA and DNA use to function are prone to errors and change is a constant. So random change is inevitable. It's why antibiotics don't work for long. It's why dachshunds don't look like wolves. In short, it's a fact of chemistry and can't be prevented. I would like to firmly deny any responsibility for how chemistry works, how the shapes of molecules result in various non-random results, how DNA is a flawed mechanism that inevitably leads to change. These things are not my fault. It is furthermore not my fault that changes in DNA can lead to apparently identical but reproductively isolated groups of animals who then experience changes of their own and develop into apparently different animals over time. I swear, I had nothing to do with it, neither 3.5 billion years ago when it started happening or yesterday when it happened again. I was, however, responsible for learning how it works, being fascinated by it and realizing that although it's complicated, it's rich and incredible and once started it functions without any supervision or direction.

Another thing I would like to deny responsibility for is that sometimes when things die they leave behind fossils, or in the case of people, they leave behind tools, houses, artwork or writing. Over the billions of years since the earliest wriggling things, every subsequent era has left it's record in rocks. This is not



my fault. I didn't put them there or tell them to fossilize. The changes that have taken place in genes over the years have also been passed on as yet another confirmation of when and how they happened. Again, I deny any responsibility for this. It is not my fault that 98% of human DNA is identical to chimpanzees. I deny responsibility for the fact that the fossil record and DNA record provide confirmation of each other. I emphatically reject any accusation that I was part of setting up the genetic, archaeological and paleontological evidence that all agrees to paint a rich and interesting portrait of the history of life on earth and our relationship to the rest of the plants and animals. It's not my fault. I didn't do it. I did, however, take the time to learn about it and to marvel at it, stand in awe of it and to see the inherent logic in it. I take responsibility for that.

Eventually the many forms of life on this earth managed to branch off in such a way that something very much like humans was around and after a few million years, as recently as 120,000 years ago, a few species very much like us were around. We call one branch Neanderthals these days and they were genetically incompatible with us<sup>115</sup> (their DNA has been analyzed). Civilization didn't exist, neither did writing or farming. These people left behind tools and lots of 'em. They left behind their dead bodies, their bones and the remnants of structures they built. I would like to deny all responsibility for the existence of these bones, tools and structures. I would like to deny all responsibility for the amounts of radioactive isotopes in the rocks above and below these items that help determine their ages. I didn't make the people, or the bones, or the rocks or the walls or the fires. I had nothing to do with it. I was not going to be born for about 120,000 years. It's a good alibi, I think. I will, however, take responsibility for learning about these people, the evidence they left, the tools they made, the bones they carried in their skin and again, for trusting the rocks when they say "I'm 100,000 years old".

An additional thing I deny responsibility for, while we're at it, is the fact that the continents drift. The continents are on giant moving plates called tectonic plates that float on hot liquid rock inside the planet which we sometimes see when there are volcanos. Sometimes they shift a little too fast and giant tsunamis kill 160,000 people. They move very slowly most of the time,

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<sup>115</sup>This is technically not true. They were compatible with us, but differed genetically to the point where scientists have determined that Neanderthals were not our ancestors and were a separate branch of the human family

obviously, or every living thing on earth would be wiped out but move they do. Coincidentally, fossils and DNA are affected by these movements as animals are separated from each other when the landmasses are separated. This is all traceable and has left evidence all over the world that agrees. This is called biogeography and it explains how animals are related and why they live in the ranges they do. It helps determine how long ago species branched from each other. It's remarkably consistent on a global level. I emphatically, categorically deny any and all responsibility for the agreement of genetic, geographical and fossil evidence in this case. I didn't make the continents move or store the records of the splits and movements in genes and fossil beds. I did, however, find it fascinating when I read all the various case studies that prove it to be the case.

For most of human history, people wandered and lived in caves and ate and hunted and made more people and developed language and stuff. For sixty times longer than the amount of time that has passed since Jesus' day they did these things and they did them all over the world. They left evidence of themselves everywhere and eventually they also left evidence of something else, the earliest civilizations, in China, India and Mesopotamia<sup>116</sup>. I was not responsible for the 55,000 year old evidence of people in Australia or the 13,000 year old evidence of people in North America. I deny responsibility for the development of cuneiform, for the early civilizations in China, for the building of the pyramids or any of the other things that happened before 4,000 years ago. It wasn't my fault. I swear, I wasn't there. I didn't do it. I didn't build all those cities, make all those clay tablets, build all those buildings that still stand to this day that ought not to be there because of a giant flood that was supposed to have happened in 2370. I do, however, admit they exist and I similarly accept how old they are.

A few thousands years into the story of civilization a nomadic people in the middle east who carried with them the traditions of their great-great-grandparents in Sumeria and memories of having been in Egypt at one point (where they were forcibly expelled by the Egyptians and were known as the Hyskos, a group of foreigners who took over the country) started recording their stories. They wrote what they remembered and thought, to themselves, for themselves. They left evidence of what they wrote and how they wrote it in their texts, they left evidence of the type of culture and civilization they had

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<sup>116</sup>There are earlier civilizations, but these were the first with writing

in their cities and camps and they are among the most studied of peoples in Western Civilization. They're called the Jews or Israelites and the history they wrote of themselves changed and grew and was rewritten and adjusted up until about 2400<sup>117</sup> years ago when it was canonized into a holy book. The book made many claims that were not correct because the authors did not have the ability to understand rocks or genes or even the larger world they lived in, had no idea where they actually came from and knew not where the stories handed down to them had come from but this was all beside the point. The book was good because it provided an identity and a law and I had nothing to do with it. I was not responsible for the archaeological evidence of who the Israelites actually were and how they developed their culture and book. It is not my fault. I am not responsible for the mythical accounts in the book about a global flood in 2370 BCE or the incorrect explanation for the origins of languages. I am not responsible for the fact that the chronology they guessed at for the beginning of the world and mankind was not even old enough to take in Egyptian or Indian history or the earliest written records in China. It is not my fault that biogeography, genetics, plate tectonics, archaeology, paleontology, paleoanthropology and every other field of scientific endeavor (whether dealing with cells or rocks) agree that the earth is 4.55 billion years old, that every living thing on it has a common ancestor and that we've been here much much longer than 6,000 years. I didn't do it. I neither put in the mistakes nor provided the evidence that highlights them as being such. I am only responsible for recognizing the contradiction and choosing to accept the word of tens of thousands of pieces of physical evidence and thousands of intelligent people against the words of somebody who wrote in ignorance, making his best guesses back in an ancient time.

Civilization grew, time elapsed, other holy books were written by others. Wars were fought, empires grew and fell, people were born and died and the holy words became more than just words. They became a message from GOD. The wars intensified as everybody thought THEY were in the right. The book changed and grew as well. Eventually somebody was born who said something different. Or perhaps he didn't. Nobody seems to have written about him while he was alive or noted his existence so he may or may not have been there at all. This led to a new holy book tacked on to the last one. A couple of centuries after this person may or may not have lived this book was

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<sup>117</sup>Really more like 2000 for the Old Testament, some would argue that the OT was still being nailed down for centuries after the Christian era began, but the Septuagint of the Hebrew Scriptures dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE

canonized and finalized, the writings were combed through and edited, other writings about this person were suppressed, destroyed or hidden. Christianity came into being. Again, I deny all responsibility for this. I didn't created the political climate in Palestine that lead to it. I didn't develop the pagan stories that were eventually woven into the Gospel stories about this person, Jesus. I deny all responsibility for the confused and contradictory state of the scriptures that were put together centuries after he may or may not have lived. I had nothing to do with it. I do take responsibility, however, for analyzing the texts, learning about what was in the Dead Sea scrolls, learning about papyrology and first century Palestine. I take full responsibility for getting as complete a picture of the times, politics and events of that day as I can and trying to learn as much as is known to Biblical scholars about the development of those books. I did that. My bad.

More time passed in the new Christian world, but not the long tens of thousands of years that had passed before history started to be written, not the millions that had passed in pre-human ancestry, just a couple of thousand years. Barely a breath. This book that had developed began to be venerated above all other things. It was put ahead of physical reality, determined to be God's direct revelation to mankind. The people doing this veneration still did not know better. They thought the sun revolved around the earth, they thought the earth was flat or on turtles. They understood very little just as those who wrote the book in the first place did but they tried their best to learn and their thoughts and efforts are still available as evidence of their time here. Just like the early Israelites, and the Mesopotamians, and the Neanderthals and the dinosaurs and everybody else who ever did anything. They show the development of their ideas and religious beliefs. I deny responsibility for their embellishments, persecutions, wars and flights of fancy. I do, however, take responsibility for studying these things to determine where the ideas I was raised with came from.

In the early 1800's in New York a man named William Miller developed an idea that he could figure out from this ancient book secrets about the future and about the second coming of the man who may or may not have lived. He pegged it as 1844. He was apparently wrong. His followers, called Millerites, were disappointed but continued. They formed a new group called Adventists. They helped teach a young man named Charles Russell who founded a group and published a magazine called The Watchtower. This seed

grew into an organization and in 1973 I was born into it. The beliefs had evolved out of with initial ideas of Russell, with modification, which had come from the ideas of the Adventists, with modification, which had come from the ideas of Miller, with modification, which had come from the ideas of Christianity and the Christian Bible, with modification, which had come from various pagan religions and the Jewish Bible, with modification, which had come from the earliest writings of the Egyptians and Sumerians, with modification, which had come from the ideas of early people, with modification, which had come about as explanations for things they did not understand like languages, fossils and the varieties of animals, with modification, which had of course come from nature which itself was formed by replication with modification going all the way back to the wiggly stuff 3.5 billion years ago. I deny all responsibility for William Miller, Charles Taze Russell, J.F. Rutherford, Nathan Knorr, Fred Franz, the Seventh Day Adventists or anybody else who contributed the ideas and concepts that made up the information I was given. After 3.5 billion years of descent with modification I happened to pop out and was told that the book had it all right and I believed it. I take responsibility for that bit. I take responsibility for believing it, but I didn't invent it, am not responsible for the process that did and take no responsibility whatsoever for the fact that it's not reflective of reality. I did, however, upon learning the real story, the long version, the true version, decide that I couldn't in good conscience venerate the book with the human idea of the story in it. I did do that.

It is not my fault that the world we live in is richer, older and more fascinating than the stories we tell about it. It's not my fault that the actual history of life on earth is preserved in rocks and genes. It's not my fault that people didn't know how to read those rocks and genes for most of their time here and so instead have venerated a book for the last few millenniums and it's not my fault that the book is full of ideas and guesses that have turned out to be incorrect. It's not my fault that a religious organization that counts my family members among it's adherents thinks that I am a bad person for understanding the real story and trusting nature more than ancient writers and it's not my fault that all of this causes me (and them) pain and suffering. I didn't make the story true and I didn't make it false. I didn't make it at all. I didn't develop the stories about God to explain things and make perfectly understandable mistakes in the process. I didn't leave all the evidence that tells the truth. I didn't develop the rules about how to treat my fellow human beings who find

reality more interesting and useful than peoples stories about it. I didn't have anything to do with any of it. I am guilty of, and take full responsibility for, recognition and acceptance. That's it. I recognize it because it's true. I accept it because to do otherwise is wishful thinking. I am not responsible for what is true and what is false. But for my recognition and acceptance of what is real, I plead guilty. The rest isn't my fault. Honestly. It's nobody's fault. It's just sad that this thing that isn't my fault, this thing called reality, over which I have no control, is at odds with a story and those odds mean I've lost my family and friends. That's not my fault, but it makes me infinitely sad

### **I feel entirely unqualified to judge cosmology and physics**

**Fri, 21 Jan 2005 09:43:06 +0000**

[An article I just read]<sup>118</sup> expounds at length about string theory, runaway expansion of the universe and the various theoretically possible ways that a Type III advanced civilization might be able to escape into a parallel universe. It's really something to read but I have to admit to being entirely unqualified to even begin to comprehend whether or not they are talking about actual science or science fiction. It's funny...

The author says that nothing he's writing about is outside of the current understanding of physics or biology and I tend to believe that he is probably correct but man... it must be how people felt in the 1800's when they read Jules Verne or H.G. Wells<sup>119</sup>. People going under the sea? To the moon? Poppycock! :-) I rarely feel out of my depth on any subject but negative energy and string theory and quantum mechanics tend to make my head hurt.

I think the funniest thing about the whole subject is that I'm cognizant of my limitations in understanding the subject matter and therefore I will refrain from even attempting to speculate on whether what they are saying makes sense. I understand just enough to be dangerous. Oddly enough, however, my Uncle Rick called me one day to go on a giant rambling monologue about how he had been reading up on string theory, Bible prophecy, Newtonian physics, quantum mechanics, the theory of relativity, the pyramids and information about parallel universes in the back of his truck<sup>120</sup> and that he was convinced

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<sup>118</sup>I no longer have the reference for this

<sup>119</sup>My favorite author as a child, BTW

<sup>120</sup>The parallel universes weren't in his truck, he was

that he had discovered the secret connections that pinpointed May 26, 2006<sup>121</sup> as the end of the world, or perhaps the day that the fundamental fabric of the universe changes or maybe something else... he wasn't entirely sure. He was just sure that something important was happening on that day. He called me to see if I could help him with the math.

I heard him out, politely, but internally I was simply asking myself if sometimes it wasn't better to keep certain ideas and information out of the hands of some people. Human beings are fantastic pattern recognizers. They can connect stars in the sky into scorpions and bears even though those stars are billions of light years from each other and the patterns are entirely an illusion based on our perspective from this planet. They can find messages encoded in books and see conspiracies wherever they feel like seeing them. There are certain people that will read about string theory and say "wow, that's really fascinating, if I'm ever capable of actually understanding what they are saying that will be great" and there are others who will read it and say "11 dimensions? That fits the number of steps in that hallway in the Great Pyramid! If advanced civilizations could escape into a parallel universe perhaps that explains where the Egyptians came from! I bet the Bible is a coded message from another civilization too... If I divide the height of the pyramid by Einsteins cosmological constant maybe I'll learn the number of letters to skip over when I read the King James Bible and a message will appear that will tell me secrets about the future..."

This kind of thing is nutty. I am fascinated by cosmology and perhaps someday, with further reading and study I may even understand WHY they theorize the things they theorize but in the meantime I'll probably think of my Uncle Rick every time I read an article like this and I'll wonder if it isn't better to just not let this info get into the hands of some people.

**hold your tongue while we speak**

**Mon, 24 Jan 2005 07:22:59 +0000**

Although it's a subject I would most definitely like to move on from eventually, and I definitely will do so, my life has been so affected these days by the whole "leaving Jehovah's Witnesses" thing that I keep coming back to it as a subject to write about. Sorry 'bout that, it's temporary.

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<sup>121</sup>I'm editing this on July 21, 2008, so he must have been mistaken

I got an angry email from my little sister not too long after I had gotten a different one from my younger brother. Both of them seem to have made the same general comment, namely, that they would have been perfectly fine with me believing whatever I wanted to just so long as I kept my mouth shut about it. They would have been sad for me, of course, because they believed that I would be killed by Jehovah at Armageddon but they would not be angry with me. As soon, however, as I posted my analysis of the first couple of chapters of the "Creation" book on this site they became furious and probably no longer want to have anything to do with me. Initially I was upset, logically, but when responding to Robbie's email I came to realization... they do this all the time.

The entire training of any Jehovah's Witness in all of their meetings is a training to go into the door-to-door ministry work, start Bible studies with people and help them develop into Jehovah's Witnesses themselves. In order to do that they are trained specifically to attack the dismantle the belief systems of others whether it's attacking the trinity, evolution, homosexuality, holidays, blood transfusions or any other subject. Their job, and one that many are quite good at, is to show people why the things they believe are wrong and teach them why the things the Witnesses teach are right. The big difference between my website here and their door-to-door work when it comes to promoting a viewpoint (say, evolution) or debunking others (say, creationism) is that I have no problem with allowing them their right to go door-to-door but they have a huge problem with me posting information on this site and they do not see that as a contradiction.

I know why they don't think it's a contradiction. They think that they are justified in their anger because they're right and I'm wrong. End of story. They think it's a matter of opinion and theory and that I've chosen the wrong side. I, on the other hand, do not consider this to be a matter of opinion. Is it a matter of opinion whether or not there are ice sheets in Greenland or Antarctica? No? They are there, right? Well, that means a global flood 4000 years ago simply could not have happened. It's quite impossible. This isn't an opinion matter, this isn't a toss-up-your-hands-and-guess-your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine situation. No, it's simple physics. Ice floats. Submerged ice would break up and float to the surface. The ice sheets have annual layers laid down over tens of thousands of years. They were not submerged 4000 years ago. It's simply a fact. I still say they have the right to go door to door and declare that Noah's



Flood was actual history and was an actual global deluge if they want to look so silly as all that but I also say that I have my right to say, um, no, it isn't history and if there was any flood at all it was local and how can you possibly believe such an obvious myth?

The problem is that I'm speaking against what they believe and when it all gelled for me just how hypocritical that was for them to make such a demand I told my sister something along the lines of what I will say now. I will stop speaking up on behalf of reality just as soon as they stop going door-to-door spreading mythology as fact. I will show my respect for their beliefs by not getting angry with them or insisting that they change them. I will not force them to confront reality but neither can they insist that I shut up here on my own web site while they work day in and day out to spread their message to other people.

If [you] wish to deny reality and go try to get others to join [you], fine and dandy, knock yourselves out. Tell people that god created each "kind", killed pretty much everybody and every thing in a flood because of the Nephilim, that the Garden of Eden was real and the fruit story was literal and that's why Jesus was sent, that languages trace back to the Tower of Babel, that the Gospel accounts of Jesus life are trustworthy eyewitness accounts and that the Bible is the literal infallible word of God. Ignore the mountains of evidence that contradict every single one of those core teachings. I don't care. Teach people the moon is made of green cheese while you're at it, just don't try to tell me that I can't agree with all the biologists, archaeologists, paleontologists, geneticists, historians, Bible scholars and plain common sense that happen to disagree with you and say so right here, in my own forum. If you don't like what I say here, don't read it. Simple as that.

### **An open letter to any Jehovah's Witnesses who visit this site**

**Mon, 24 Jan 2005 07:30:26 +0000**

Hello former brother or sister of mine. I am a former Jehovah's Witness and there is information on this site that is critical of the publications and beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses. It is not intended to be critical in an emotional way but rather an analytical one. There is discussion of logical fallacies, quotes taken out of context, mistakes, deliberate omissions, even deceptions in the publications of the Watchtower Society. These are not little slip-ups, they are

issues that raise serious doubts about the entire foundation of the Witness belief system and even the inspired nature of the Bible. You have been warned.

Additionally, on my personal journal and other parts of this site I may write about my experiences and feelings related to how I have been treated by my family and friends since I left the Witnesses. This is simply my personal writing about my personal situation and personal feelings. It may offend you, but offense is not the intent.

While you may have been told that ex-Witnesses are all bitter and negative people who simply want to destroy your faith, this could not be further from the truth. I love the people I knew among the Witnesses and have lots of fond memories of pioneering, attending assemblies and feeling bonded by brotherhood. I miss that, to be honest. I miss it but I left for a specific reason and that reason is that I found out that the Witness theology was not supported by any evidence whatsoever and that all available evidence pointed to a dramatically different set of answers to the great questions of "how did we get here" and "why is there sickness and death". I did not want to leave but I had been taught to be honest and to follow my conscience. The only honest way to respect my conscience once I was in possession of all the facts was to leave the Witnesses. This is something I did not do lightly and it is something I suggest that everybody who is thinking of leaving weighs very carefully. The people you love will suddenly become much harder to love when they treat you like dirt and assume you've lost your mind or turned into some sort of degenerate. They simply can't fathom that they might actually be wrong. Unquestioning devotion to a cause is a dangerous thing but it's a common enough phenomenon that it's understandable. It simply hurts to be the victim of it.

There is other information on this site as well because I have lots of interests in my life. I love books, music, movies, writing, performing, even drawing and painting. I have a wonderful son, I program computers for a living, I have a collection of pipes, I love football... in short, I am a fairly well-rounded and multi-faceted person. I do not spend my days dwelling on the Witnesses or obsessing over how I was treated when I decided it wasn't true. I understand that they are good people who honestly feel that what they are doing is right. I understand this because I was one for the first 30 years of my life. I'm still a bit blown away by the life I have today as it is not one I ever would have

imagined, but as John Lennon says, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans".

It is my hope that as time goes on and the shock wears off that my life will continue with something like normality. The Witness related content on this site will decline and other things will take it's place. There is just no room for living in the past or wondering what might have been. I was born a Witness, raised a Witness and baptized for 15 years. I'd like those years back, I'd like to live a life where I understood reality sooner, but there ain't much I can do about it except live the next 30 well and that's what I intend to do. So, if you still wish to visit my site, standing forewarned, please do. Understand, this isn't an anti-Witness site, just a site about a guy who used to be your brother.

Ryan

## **adventures in Buddhism**

**Sat, 05 Mar 2005 14:04:00 +0000**

I am not a Buddhist, at least not officially. I have never attended any sort of Buddhist teaching group, monastery or anything of the sort. Frankly, I know precious little about Buddhism.

My introduction to Buddhism was, as most things were, via the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (aka, Jehovah's Witnesses) in their book on comparative religion, "Mankind's Search for God" (MSFG). MSFG had a lot to say about Buddhism, including a bit about the teachings and history and they end with the following:

### *Enlightenment Without God?*

*51 Accounts of the life of the Buddha relate that on one occasion he and his disciples were in a forest. He picked up a handful of leaves and said to his disciples: "What I have taught you is comparable to the leaves in my hand, what I have not taught you is comparable to the amount of leaves in the forest." The implication, of course, was that the Buddha had taught only a fraction of what he knew. However, there is one important omission-Gautama the Buddha had next to nothing to say about God; neither did he ever claim to be God. In fact, it is said that he told his disciples, "If there*

*is a God, it is inconceivable that He would be concerned about my day-to-day affairs," and "there are no gods who can or will help man."*

*52 In this sense, Buddhism's role in mankind's search for the true God is minimal. The Encyclopedia of World Faiths observes that "early Buddhism appears to have taken no account of the question of God, and certainly did not teach or require belief in God." In its emphasis on each person's seeking salvation on his own, turning inward to his own mind or consciousness for enlightenment, Buddhism is really agnostic, if not atheistic. (See box, page 145.) In trying to throw off Hinduism's shackles of superstition and its bewildering array of mythical gods, Buddhism has swung to the other extreme. It ignored the fundamental concept of a Supreme Being, by whose will everything exists and operates.-Acts 17:24, 25.*

*53 Because of this self-centered and independent way of thinking, the result is a veritable labyrinth of legends, traditions, complex doctrines, and interpretations generated by the many schools and sects over the centuries. What was meant to bring a simple solution to the complicated problems of life has resulted in a religious and philosophical system that is beyond the comprehension of most people. Instead, the average follower of Buddhism is simply preoccupied with worshiping idols and relics, gods and demons, spirits and ancestors, and performing many other rituals and practices that have little to do with what Gautama the Buddha taught. Clearly, seeking enlightenment without God does not work.*

Buddhism was basically summarized as being irrelevant to the belief or non-belief in God, it has little or nothing to say about God. Therefore, the Watchtower Society summarily dismisses Buddhism (of course) because they (of course) advocate a strong belief in an all-powerful divinity. Going back and reading the MSFG book now it makes me chuckle a little about how each religion is presented just so that it can be dismissed as a failed attempt to find the true religion, which is of course available from the publishers. Judaism, all other forms of Christianity, Taoism, Shinto, Hindu, etc, etc, etc, are all shot down one after another and in looking at this now I kind of smirk a little at what a relatively shoddy propaganda job the book is. It is obviously written by Witnesses, for Witnesses to help them feel OK with dismissing the rest of humanity and their attempts at spirituality as futile.

I have found that the discovery that there is no rational reason to believe in God has been liberating but at the same time that there are still fundamental

realities of the human condition that I am dealing with. There are the big questions about mortality, evil, my place in the universe and the feeling of being a tiny insignificant speck in the center of an unfathomably vast uncaring universe in which I play no meaningful role whatsoever. Granted, there are emotional factors at play here (how to deal with fear? how to not feel hopeless or irrelevant?) but there is also the need for practical solutions to the management of life that don't require kowtowing to a mythical deity or putting off reality for some imaginary future paradise. Buddhism was invented to crack this particular nut, more as a life philosophy than a religion.

A life without superstition is not rootless or meaningless, in fact, quite the opposite. A life without superstition is overwhelming because there is so much meaning, you are so connected to everything, that it's nearly impossible to know how to steady your mind, to quiet yourself, to manage the vast scale of everything so that you can just live an effective human life. I know what I want. I want to do good, I want to leave a mark for future humans, I want to learn everything I can, I want to experience a full life and die satisfied with how I've lived. Those are "what's" but the big question has been, "how?" and I've found some intriguing ideas in what Jennifer Hecht<sup>122</sup> calls "graceful-life philosophies" and in what I've read of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. While Jesus too is credited with having taught many things that can help a person manage life and live a productive, happy and moral existence, it is hard to pay attention to those beautiful teachings when they get mangled by Paul and his Christ mythology, the pagan Gospel stories, the fake Orthodox history, eschatology and absurd Protestant morality. I am pro-Jesus but I am anti-Christ<sup>123</sup>. The man (if he really lived) said some good things (if you actually concentrate just on the sayings that are likely to have actually come from him) but once he was transformed into a Son of God and layers of superstition were piled on him, well, it's just too much work to sift through it all.

So, I prefer a more secular approach, something simpler, something more about calming my mind, learning to focus on the relative nature of time to cherish the moments and savor everything. I prefer ideas and concepts that enrich my understanding of the world, remove false superstitions and equip me to not feel overwhelmed by everything and to rather feel part of it. Buddhism seems to fit the bill, in a very secular form, so I am now studying it a

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<sup>122</sup>Author of the excellent book "Doubt: A History", among others

<sup>123</sup>Having already been identified as such by the Watchtower Society, I decided to put a different spin on it

bit and I like what I'm finding. I'll write more on the subject when I have more to write....

### **14.5 Billion Years to learn, almost caught up to last week...**

**Sat, 05 Mar 2005 14:36:00 +0000**

I am writing today from Dunn Brothers Coffee in Duluth MN. Es and I are sitting upstairs in a lovely little lofty type area. We've been going to book stores all day and we're staying in this nice little cabin where we can look out the window at the lake. It's all rather idyllic. Es is working on her blog (I think) but I've never read it. Well, that's not true, I just read it for the first time while sitting here thinking about this across the table from Esther. She doesn't know I just read it so I will post this for her benefit:

Es, I read your blog just before you remarked on what a nice Dunn Bros coffee show this was and I told you how fitting I thought it was for the locale. :-)

A couple of days ago I was at Barnes & Noble and I was looking at a magazine that made no sense to me whatsoever. It was some sort of hip creative modernish thing with all sorts of pop culture in it that was probably out of style before the ink dried on the pages. I looked at it puzzled. I understood it, vaguely, the way a person visiting an alien planet might be able to divine the basic usages of some of the items they encounter but generally just find themselves reminded that they weren't at home. I have long felt like I was not at home in the culture and world I live in and magazines like that only seem to drive the point home.

Oddly enough, however, this particular experience of that feeling was different. For once I thought, "I will understand all of these soon enough, it's on the list". Normally I wouldn't care, I would just shrug off my alien status as, well, inevitable, and go on to the history, science or literature sections. No longer. I want to make music, I want to create art, I want to speak and in order to do that I need to at least understand the language of my own times. It won't do to understand Victorian gothic fiction and impressionism more than I understand the world of 2005. Won't do at all. I can, and will, figure it all out, although I don't think I'll go so far as subscribing to "W" like Reed did<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup>My brother Reed is the only heterosexual male I ever met who subscribed to the fashion magazine "W". Perhaps it was because he liked looking at the models.

This realization, that I actually care about catching back up to the world around me, brought with it a second realization. I realized that I've been involved in much more than a religious deconversion the last year. I have been involved in a total restructuring of my understanding of the world, what it all means and what my place is in it. I have been trying to reload all the memory banks in my brain with the real history of life, of my species, of the country I live in, of art, of music, of philosophy, of science, basically trying to rebuild the foundation upon which the rest of my life is built. Basically, I had to go back to square one (the beginning of the universe) and work my way back up to 2005, absorbing the basic philosophical and historical repercussions of all the events in that 14.5 billion years so that I can feel confident with moving on with my life, planning for my future, determining my value systems, developing my personal moral code, figuring out what I will do, where I will go, how I will raise my kid, figuring out how to communicate to the time I live in using something close to a relevant voice... It's a lot of work to do in 12 months and I think I've accomplished at least the broad brush outline learning. There are still a LOT of details I could fill in, but I don't need to fill them all in. Just enough to bring me up to today and give me a rough guess about what I'm going to do tomorrow.

It's funny but with all this time spent reading history, art, philosophy, religion, science and other assorted non-fiction I have had little time for fiction and literature, for listening to new music or going to shows. Those things, the details of human experience, take on new meanings when the framework of my understanding of reality changes and it seems to alter slightly nearly every day. So, I've been negligent of those areas. I am starting to try to change that again. I am forcing myself to move into the fiction and literature sections in book stores again. I am slowly returning to the world of personal expression and I'm find that I have new things I want to say, new ways I want to say them and new understandings of the ideas and motivations of others.

I have fallen (possibly most woefully) behind in technology which moves so fast that even a momentary lapse can leave you obsolete. I have moved off of the bleeding edge back to the cutting edge and back again to the comfy middle. That won't do at all. I can only coast on tech for so long<sup>125</sup>. I need to get caught up on what I've missed in the last 12-24 months (my tech lapse predates a lot of

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<sup>125</sup>Professionally, I am, after all, a computer software developer

this other stuff because my life was such a horrible hell that I couldn't concentrate on it then either). I used to know what everything was before it made the news. I had to look up the word "podcast" the other day and discovered that it's meaning was something I had an idea for about 5 years ago when I was ahead of the curve. Ack. Once I am caught on up the humanities I will move back ahead of the curve. I will. I will understand that stupid magazine... but maybe, just maybe, I've been permanently weened off of television. I can't imagine wasting time just sitting there WATCHING things.... I mean, who has time for that?

## **Why I Say I'm Pro-Jesus, Anti-Christ**

**Mon, 07 Mar 2005 06:20:00 +0000**

In the post I made on Saturday I said I was pro-Jesus, anti-Christ and I figured I should clarify what I meant a little lest the visitors to my little blog here get the wrong impression. I'm NOT saying I'm *the anti-Christ* or even that I believe such a thing exists. What I meant to refer to was that I agree with what can be known about Jesus actual historical teachings but I reject all of the Pauline stuff, miracle stories and silliness that deified the guy<sup>126</sup>.

I've said before that I am not necessarily even convinced conclusively that Jesus was even a historical person. This is not because I am opposed the idea of him (far from it) but because for an event that was supposedly 4,000 years in the making, Jesus visit here was completely unrecorded. There was not a single recorded word written about the man during his entire life. Not one word, not one story, nothing, was written down by him. There are no secular references to him that come from his time period (even Josephus wrote long after he was dead and it is generally agreed by scholars that his words related to Jesus are a later addition to the text, for reasons I will not go into here<sup>127</sup>).

The texts that are written about Jesus consist of the Gospels and the letters of Paul and frankly, both run into serious problems. First, the Gospels were written decades after Jesus was dead and two of them (Matthew and Luke) are just expanded copies of a third one (Mark). Matthew takes Mark and adds Hebrew Scripture references to it, Luke takes Mark and tries to make it more of

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<sup>126</sup>This position was also taken by Thomas Jefferson when he crafted his own miracle and Paul free version of the gospels in order to have a book that was about how Jesus lived and what he taught instead of about the sacrificial meaning of his death

<sup>127</sup>But a quick Google search on Josephus, Jesus and interpolation will allow you to find out what I'm talking about and judge for yourself



a real "history" by combining it with other stories that had been floating around about Jesus at the time. So what about Mark? Is it an eyewitness account? No. First, bible scholars have noted Mark almost certainly did not write the book that bears his name and that even if he did, Mark would have had to get his information from Peter since Mark wasn't present for most of the stories and had little interaction with Jesus anyhow, according to the Gospels themselves. Mark too was not written until 65-70 CE, 35-40 years after Jesus death. All of these things make Mark a little questionable as a "history" but there is more.

The first century church fathers referred to a second book of Mark which explained the first one. So, what we have of Mark today is not the complete story. What there is of it tells a story that closely reflects a Jewish version of the Osiris-Dionysus-Mithras story, complete with exact retellings of many popular pagan mystery stories of the day, attributed to Jesus. The parallels between the miracle stories and the sayings of Jesus and the much older Hellenic (i.e. Greek) pagan stories are jaw-dropping if you ever look into them. The majority of current bible scholars believe that none of the events about the life of Jesus were accurately recorded and that the Gospels Mark, Matthew and Luke are all completely fictional (but incorporating the sayings of Jesus<sup>128</sup>). They were not written as historical documents, (well, Luke might have been, but his source material was not) but rather as stories intended to teach the sayings of Jesus in ways that made sense. This, by the way, was normal at that time in history. All the extent pagan mystery religions worked that way by inventing stories to illustrate important concepts and teachings. The difference was that they KNEW the stories were not real. Fiction was being used to teach. In the case of the Gospels, it soon became mistaken for fact and that explains a lot.

It explains why John doesn't agree with the other three on the order of events, length of the ministry or any other important detail. It doesn't have to, it's a teaching story, not history. It explains why even the three books that generally agree (Mark, Matthew, Luke, the Synoptics) still contradict each other quite a bit. It explains why there was a "second Mark" or "secret Mark" because this second book was used to illuminate the stories of the first book. If you pick up any college textbook on New Testament studies you'll learn all of this stuff. I

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<sup>128</sup>This is a reference to the Q Hypothesis

am not making any of it up, although I could have erred on a detail or two here. I am writing on the bus off the top of my head, after all...

I've looked at enough evidence to agree with the majority of scholars who state that the Gospels are mystery stories invented to preserve and teach the sayings of Jesus rather than true stories about the historical person. It's hard for me to accept a miracle when it is attributed to Jesus but reject the exact same miracle when it was attributed to Pythagoras five centuries earlier. There is something fishy there<sup>129</sup>...

The sayings themselves, then, can we be sure about them? Again the answer is "not completely". It appears that there are a core of actual sayings that might be attributable to the actual Jesus. There is no denying that whether these sayings are ideas expounded by this man (I see no reason to dispute this or to agree with it, I just think it seems as likely as Confucious or Buddha saying any of the things attributed to them, meaning that they aren't word for word correct) or whether they are ideas formed within communities of his followers and attributed to him that there is a lot of wisdom there. Is it supernatural wisdom? Is it so far beyond the wisdom that humans had already expounded for themselves prior to his arrival? Well, quite honestly, there is little or nothing in these sayings that was not predated by similar teachings in eastern religious traditions and Greek philosophy. This particular combination of teachings did speak to a variety of people living in that time and place (1st century Palestine) and followers of Jesus began to spring up all over the place but there really weren't any major new ideas in these teachings, not until Paul got involved, not until Paul turned Jesus the teacher and political/social martyr into Jesus the Risen Saviour of all Mankind.

Paul never met Jesus. At first, Paul persecuted the people who did follow Jesus. Paul was a Hellenized Jew who decided to follow Jesus and when he did, did it with a frantic energy. Read his letters (they're the earliest writings in the Bible related to Jesus) and you get no sense whatsoever that there even WAS a historical Jesus, but just a cosmic savior figure. I personally get the sense reading Paul that he was very devout about what he was doing and really thought he was on to something but that he was pretty much making stuff up in response to the criticisms of his contemporaries, the challenges

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<sup>129</sup>Pun intended. This is a reference to the story in which Jesus has his disciples drop their nets off the other side of the boat and they catch a bunch of fish

arising in his congregations and whatever things were going on in his head. Reading the letters of Paul and the historical circumstances that occasioned them tells you nothing at all about Jesus but a lot about what Paul thought Jesus ought to be. Do I believe that Paul got all of his knowledge through divine revelation? No, I think Paul got his beliefs/teachings from himself, his background, the culture he lived in, all the obvious places. By the time the Gospels were written, Paul's was just one form of Christianity that was around and I can't say for sure (nobody can) that his was the one closest to what Jesus taught. In fact, it seems to have been pretty different from what Jesus said when he was alive.

You might be wondering why it is that if Paul's letters are older than the Gospels that the Gospels appear first in the Bible? Well, that's an easy one. The Bible wasn't assembled until a few centuries later and when they did that they went with seemed to present the reader with the most consistent appearance. History may be that Paul really invented "Christianity" in response to Paganism, Jewish Messianic expectations and Greek culture, wrote his letters, founded his congregations and THEN somebody decided to go make up the stories about Jesus, but that was not the view that the 2nd and 3rd century folks who assembled the New Testament (Greek Scriptures) wanted to present. It wouldn't do to start the NT with 1st Thessalonians even though it's the earliest document. That would be confusing. It is even possible that by the time they canonized everything they didn't even know. It was already ancient history for them the same way the revolutionary war is for you. Think about it, less time has passed between George Washington and the Revolutionary War and our day than between Jesus and the assembling of the New Testament. Fills you with confidence, don't it?

In summary, I think Jesus (or his followers) had some good teachings and I respect them. I don't think he was a cosmic messiah or saviour for all mankind since all of that stuff was tacked on decades after his death by people who never even met him. The word "christ" is adapted from the greek kristos, which means messiah or saviour. So, I am pro-Jesus and anti-Christ, I am in favor of the things he taught and I reject all the other stuff that was made up about him. Does that make sense?

**reads and reviews from the last 12 months...**

**Fri, 11 Mar 2005 13:10:00 +0000**

This is a collection of books I have read over the last, oh I don't know, 12 months or so and my thoughts on them... They're in alphabetical order simply because I'm working off my Delicious Library list for self-reference:

"All Scripture is Inspired of God and Beneficial" - Watchtower Bible and Tract Society: This is an interesting book. It is the Watchtower's book of apologetics for a literal interpretation of the Bible. It represents an entirely conservative fundamentalist view of the scriptures, ignoring mountains of evidence that contradict its traditional views while cherry-picking the evidence to support itself. An example, in the coverage of the book of Matthew they ignore the extensive evidence that dates the writing of Matthew as happening (at the earliest) after 70 CE and place it instead at 41 CE. Their rationale is that a copy of Matthew from the 10th century (that's right, 1000 years later) has "41 CE" written on it. They support the traditional belief of Moses as the author of the first five books of the Bible and all the traditional conservative beliefs. No attention whatsoever is given to the evidence of the Documentary Hypothesis, the Q text or any of the other generally accepted modern views on the development of the Bible. Overall, useful in understanding just how woefully incomplete and naive the fundamentalist picture of the Bible is.

Age of Propaganda, The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion - Anthony Pratkanis and Eliot Aronson: Wow. This book is amazing. The authors are professors of sociology who describe the psychological methods by which persuasion techniques used by advertisers, religious leaders and politicians work. Through use of controlled studies, statistics and reasoning they outline all the many ways that the average person's opinions are being shaped, tugged, pushed and pulled in their everyday lives. You can't read this book without recognizing the situations and scenarios it describes and realizing where you have indeed been persuaded. They do not necessarily take a judgmental approach to the topic, more like a clinical one, taking the line that it is better to understand the topic and know when and how persuasion is being used so that you can make the correct decisions in your life. On a personal note, I found the section on "How to Start a Cult" particularly eye-opening in the way it perfectly describes the operations of Jehovah's Witnesses. I further found it fascinating that I discovered this book via a reference in a Witness publication (an Awake! magazine). If this book describes the way the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is run as the way to run a cult and the Witnesses quoted

this book, well... I just found it interesting... I'll leave the drawing of conclusions as an exercise for the reader...

The Ancestor's Tale, A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution - Richard Dawkins: Starting from humankind and tracing backwards in time to our common ancestors may not seem like an interesting thing but this book is simply incredible. The concept that all life on earth is descended from a common ancestor may seem hard to grasp but after reading this book it's perfectly clear. It's not even that complicated and the evidence is mind-boggling. I could not put this book down and I highly recommend it to everybody who is interested in knowing how and why we are all of us, cats, chimps, trees, sponges, related.

The Austere Academy - Lemony Snicket: I am currently reading the Lemony Snicket books to Syd before bedtime. Anyhow, it's terribly tragic, funny, well written and enjoyable but so far I think that the Reptile Room is my favorite...

The Bad Beginning - Lemony Snicket: Lots o' fun. Horrible, yes. Depressing, yes. But lots o' fun.

Birth of Christianity, Reality and Myth - Joel Carmichael: The author puts forth the interesting theory that Christianity grew out of a combination of events: Jewish messianic "end times" fervor, a guerilla leader / revolutionary / "messiah" named Jesus and a vision had by Peter after the state killed Jesus for sedition. He paints a very interesting and archeologically supported picture of first century Palestine and does a very good job of helping to describe the Jewish mindset at the time and exactly what the "end times" meant to them. He also makes a strong case for a possible path by which the martyred political figure could have transformed into the celestial Christ figure. A little dense but a good read none-the-less.

The Blind Watchmaker, Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design - Richard Dawkins: This is one of Dawkins most famous books and for good reason. As an introductory text to understanding the basic fact that there are things that can function as a "designer" that require no sentient will or purpose and that those processes are responsible for life as we know it this book is invaluable. There are more up-to-date books with better scientific evidence in them (The Ancestor's Tale is one from the same author) but this book is still extremely valuable.

The Case for Christ - Lee Strobel: Like the Watchtower's "All Scriptures" book, this is a book of Christian apologetics but rather than defending the literal truth of the Bible it is defending the historicity of Jesus. The author makes a few good points and a lot of major stretches. The book is structured as the author conducting interviews with a bunch of theologians and Bible scholars (all of the conservative religious bent, no secular scholars or dissenting opinions) with the author playing the role of skeptic and the interviewees answering his questions. My biggest problem with the book, I think, was that Strobel isn't very good at being the skeptic. The questioning leaves out the most important questions that entered in to my mind and the answers given by those being interviewed were quite unsatisfactory and illogical in nearly all the most critical subject areas. I kept having additional questions that I would want to ask that would (admittedly) undermine the argument that was being presented. It's the kind of book that at least acknowledges skepticism and attempts to paint a path that a relatively passive skeptic who wants to be lead to a conclusion can follow. For some people it's probably eye-opening, for me it was little more than a new vehicle to argue some very old ideas that provided little in the way of new information and avoided all the most important evidence and questions.

Cat's Cradle - Kurt Vonnegut: I. Loved. This. Book. Of course, you can't go wrong with Vonnegut, he's an incredible writer, but this book constructs an end of the world scenario and religious conception that are simply unlike anything else ever. After reading about bokononism I half wanted to become one if for no other reason than that it is the only religion I have seen propounded that embraces the fact that it's all just a lie to make life easier and integrates that fact into it's very fabric. This book is a must read for, well, anybody.

The Daily Show Presents America (the Book): A. I learned more about America from this book than from all other school textbooks combined. B. I laughed my ass off in the process. Amazingly funny stuff, but what do you expect from Jon Stewart?

Darwin's Black Box, The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution - Michael Behe: This book pisses me off. Raising a question that needs to be answered is standard scientific procedure. You then hypothesize an answer and you test

your hypothesis to see if it withstands analysis. A book like this, which simply poses questions and then says, 'It's too complicated, an intelligent designer must have done it' is not science, it's propaganda. In fact, it's specifically propaganda being funded and planned by the conservative Christians in America. I read the book, it looks like science, can fool somebody into thinking it's science, but it's not science. It's quack propaganda and doesn't raise any questions that biologists have not already been able to solve within the structure of evolutionary theory. It has, however, provided scientists with a good example of what the Christian Right is using in their new agenda for control of, well, everything. Be afraid, be very afraid.

Equal Rites - Terry Pratchett: I just discovered Discworld this last year and for a guy who really really really misses Douglas Adams, it's a joy. I love all of these books. They're all great. Every one.

Evolution, The Fossils Still Say No! - Duane Gish: OK, I admit, I only skimmed this one. I was laughing so hard and the arguments being made were so absurd and silly that I couldn't even read it with a straight face. Plus, well, I'd read every single argument made before and knew all the reasons they were wrong so there was nothing to see here. I moved along, as one should.

From Hell - Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell: This is a graphic novel, a huge, brooding, literary epic that tells the story of Jack the Ripper. It's incredible, deep, rich, fascinating and gothic. An absolute classic, right up there with Watchmen, Sandman and Dark Knight Returns.

The Genesis Flood, The Biblical Record and It's Scientific Implications - Morris & Whitcomb: This is what happens when people start with an assumption (the Bible is God's infallible word) and work back from there. This is the opposite of science and therefore it fails on every single possible test of reason and logic. The fact that this book is still published and referenced by Flood supporters and fundamentalists is a tragic statement about the level of ignorance and misunderstanding of reality in our world.

Great Wine Made Simple, Straight Talk From a Master Sommelier - Andrea Immer: I have yet to finish this book but what I have read has completely demystified wine for me. I have bought more wine with more confidence and I have yet to make a major wine-buying mistake since getting this plain English

no-nonsense advice. Great book. Highly recommended for the wine novice who doesn't want to become a snob.

A History of God, the 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam - Karen Armstrong: The author synthesizes information from many sources to paint the most accurate picture of what we can currently know about the development of the world's three great monotheistic religious traditions. Using scriptures, archeology, secular histories and lots more she traces the development of ideas and beliefs in a way that will most likely shock and surprise you. The story is likely not what you think it is but this is the story that really fits the available evidence and it's fascinating.

How to Practice, The Way to a Meaningful Life - The Dalai Lama: I am fascinated but many of the ideas of Buddhism and much of what the Lama had to say in this book was useful to me. I did not, however, find it particularly helpful when he went off on metaphysical tangents or discussed mythical ideas like cosmic rebirth. I see no more reason to believe in cyclic rebirth than to believe in any other wishful thinking of people (going to heaven, getting resurrected) as the evidence in favor of each is identical... none. Still, his thoughts on morality, wisdom and using discipline to achieve mindfulness were very valuable.

How We Believe, Science Skepticism and the Search for God - Michael Shermer: In this book, Shermer attempts to figure out what exactly makes us believe in God, angels, the supernatural, etc. It's an interesting read although at times he strays from the topic. He does provide some interesting information on studies that have been conducted to provide rational explanations for such things as out of body experiences and visions and the like, thereby helping paint the picture that people of faith aren't necessarily inventing the things they feel/see/believe, but are simply misinterpreting what those things mean.

The Illustrated Brief History of Time - Stephen Hawking: OK, I admit, this one went over my head at times. Fascinating, complex and really fun to dig into when you want to know about the fundamental fabric of reality and stuff. The easiest that cosmology gets, probably, but still damn hard. I gotta read it again...



The Jesus Mysteries, Was the Original Jesus a Pagan God? - Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy: This book is interesting in that it makes some outlandish and completely unprovable claims but does raise a huge number of good questions. It's only pseudo-scholarly and it is my opinion that the authors let the conclusion they want to reach direct them too much so I don't really agree with their conclusions or their overly enthusiastic methodology. On the other hand, there is much of what they are saying that is confirmed and spoken about in the far more scholarly and well-researched texts on the same subject and while I don't think that Jesus was simply a Jewish version of the Osiris-Dionysus-Bacchus mystery religion (their central thesis) I do think that they are correct that the Gospels were developed out of that story and that the historical Jesus was only the kernel around which the layers of myth were built. So I agree with them and disagree with them at the same time. Also, I would hardly call their coverage of the matter unbiased or scholarly, but interesting for an amateurish effort and worth the read.

Johnny the Homicidal Maniac, Directors Cut - Jhonen Vasquez: This is the darkest comic book I have ever read. An insane homicidal maniac killing everybody to feed his wall with blood. It's insane, it's twisted, it's genius. I don't know what is wrong with Jhonen Vasquez and I hope it never happens to me (whatever it is) but this and Fillerbunny and Invader Zim (yes, the Nickelodeon cartoon) are all his mad works and I love 'em, I love 'em all, even if I could barely get through this one because it was just TOO dark sometimes.

Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell - Susanna Clarke: This is simply a very good novel. The concept is that Victorian England has a tradition of practical and theoretical magic and two magicians attempt to revive the practical application of magic for the modern times. A little slow in parts but a very good read that has wonderful use of language, memorable characters and a lot of really fun scenes and ideas.

Last Chance to See - Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine: I am not afraid to say I am a huge Douglas Adams fan and I've have read every book he has published. This one, however, was in some ways even more enjoyable than his usual fiction because it consists of his real life adventures attempting to find and see some of the worlds most endangered animals from crazy stuff like the kakapo to rhinos and silverback gorillas. It's fascinating, educational, funny,

sad and bittersweet because although the animals he wrote about still exist, Douglas does not and the world lost a great man when it lost him.

Lives That Shaped Your Life-Bob Bracher: This is not a book to sit and read in one sitting, or even from beginning to end. It's a collection of newspaper clippings about famous and not-so-famous people reporting upon their deaths. It covers the gamut of human activity and of recorded journalism. It's fascinating because the clippings are original and sometimes have to be pored over just to be understood. The thread uniting all the reporting is that the lives of these people had some sort of impact on others. Extremely fascinating reading. I haven't read all of the obits yet but I feel like adding to the collection by collecting the write-ups on the people who have shaped my life at a more personal level who are now gone.

The Louvre - Alexandra Bonfante-Warren: This is a rather handsome coffee-table book containing tons of art from The Louvre Museum in Paris. I have only recently begun developing a true appreciation for visual arts and painting and I've spent hours going through and studying these works, reading about them and pondering their historical and personal significance. What else is there to say? If you like art, this is a book to have. :-)

The Miserable Mill - Lemony Snicket: Easily my least favorite of the "Series of Unfortunate Events" books. I mean, if you're going to read one, you should read 'em all, and that means this one too, but it is kinda boring and lame, relative to the others.

The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity - Hyam Maccoby: Even when combined with Perrins and Dulings book, the Jesus Mysteries book, the Joel Carmichael book and various other sources (like Armstrong's "History of God") this book still provides some very interesting insights into the actual rational process behind the development of Pauline Christianity. What were the problems that Paul was trying to solve as he constructed his message? Where did he get his ideas and how do the scriptures show the development of his conceptions of Christ and God? Those are the questions that Hyam Maccoby sets out to answer in this book and as a portrait of a very human and very sincere Paul it's really great. The sheer scope of understanding that the author is attempting to gain of the author of the Bible texts requires more than a few leaps of psychoanalysis and reconceptions of texts, but this guy has done

his homework and his arguments are strong, logical and explain much of the context around the writings of the Pauline letters of the Christian Bible.

The Pipe Companion - David Wight: Not really a "reading" kind of book, more about browsing nice pictures of pipes and reading about the makers of the ones you like. As a newbie to the world of pipes I did find it instructional.

The Reptile Room - Lemony Snicket: My favorite "Unfortunate" book so far. I love the giant snake and the macabre sense of humor.

A Short History of Nearly Everything - Bill Bryson: If you want to know how we know what we know, who discovered it, why we know it's true and all that fascinating history of the development of knowledge, this is the book to read. Bryson is a great writer, very accessible and very much a "normal guy". This book is written for "normal folks" who just want to know, well, how we know. It's great, clear, intelligent, expansive... A must read for everybody, in my opinion. One of my favorite books of the year.

Sister Wendy's 1000 Masterpieces - Wendy Beckett and Patricia Wright: Another big thick art book (like the Louvre one) but not constrained to a single museum's collection. It's 1000 of the greatest works of art, commented on by a nun named Sister Wendy. I think she selects a little too heavily from religious themed works (although by no means does she restrict herself to them, she's all over the place in her selections). She has a great eye for art and I agree that these are masterpieces. I am slowly working through this one, just like the Louvre one (and the Barnes Museum CD-ROM "A Passion for Art"), pondering the paintings and learning learning learning.

Skywriting By Word of Mouth - John Lennon: This was a tough book to get through. John is a tiring writer, with no apparent rhyme or reason to what he is writing. Enjoyable, in small doses, witty, to an extreme, but not really my thing. Sorry John. I love ya, but the book... just didn't work for me...

Squee's Wonderful Big Giant Book of Unspeakable Horrors - Jhonen Vasquez: More stuff along the lines of Johnny the Homicidal Maniac, dark, twisted, horrific, painful, funny. Not for the faint of heart, sick and wrong, but riveting.

Watchmen - Alan Moore: I had read for years about the genius that was Watchmen, about how it broke the ground for the graphical novels that came afterwards and it did not disappoint. Watchmen is dark, humorous, touching, epic and completely phenomenal. I wish I had read it sooner.

Who Wrote the New Testament? - Burton Mack: This is easily the best and most completely well-researched of the various books on New Testament and Christian studies I have read this year. Mack covers a lot of ground and he covers it very well. He provides much of the groundwork that other books are built on. Excellent.

Who Wrote the Bible? - Richard Elliot Friedman: A perfect introduction to the science of textual analysis and to the Documentary Hypothesis. Great book, but very different from the Mack book. Much more accessible.

The New Testament, Proclamation and Paranesis - Duling and Perrins: This is basically a college text book for New Testament studies. It's a tough read but if you read the more popularized treatments (like Armstrong) and wonder where they got their information from, this is a great reference to have.

The Night Watch / The Color of Magic / The Light Fantastic - Terry Pratchett: I read all of these Discworld books this year, although I am not sure where they wound up and therefore they are not in alphabetical order because they aren't in my Delicious Library. Oh well. They're freakin' hilarious and if you like words, ideas and social satire you gotta read 'em.

Well, I'm sure I missed a few here and there. There are a bunch more that I haven't finished yet but have started. I'll post on those as I finish them, or maybe I won't, I dunno.

### **The Ill(iad) and Theodicy**

**Tue, 15 Mar 2005 09:12:00 +0000**

theodicy: A vindication of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil.

I never heard the word theodicy until I started reading James Morrow's book "Blameless in Abaddon" but I had been aware of various theodicies my entire

life. A theodicy is, as mentioned in the definition, an argument intended to explain the seemingly contradictory concepts of a just, merciful and loving God and the obvious facts of human suffering and death. The theodicies discussed in Morrow's book (which is possibly the only popular fiction novel I am aware of that has theodicies as a central part of its plot...) are:

The Disciplinary Defense: Suffering is a tool God uses to teach humankind. It's for our own good.

The Hidden Harmony Defense: What appears terrible only appears that way because we are unaware of God's bigger plan.

The Eschatological Defense: Oh sure there is pain today, but a reward awaits in the future (heaven, a paradise, etc) that will more than make up for it and therefore it's just.

The Ontological Defense: Because God is the only perfect thing and because perfection can only be perfect relative to imperfection, imperfection must exist or the perfect creation would itself BE God.

The Free Will Defense: Pain and suffering are a result of free will. Free will, by definition, allows some to choose to do evil.

The theodicy I was raised with and used to teach other people was a combination of the Hidden Harmony and Eschatological defenses. It went something like this:

When God created the universe he created everything perfect. There were no wars, famines, earthquakes, volcanoes or diseases. God is, of course, perfect and unchanging and therefore would not have given up his plans for a perfect universe simply because humanity and the devil rebelled. He still has this plan in mind, however, he needs to prove for once and for all that his laws are the best laws, that he has the right to make the rules. Humanity itself is not on trial, but it's right to govern itself is being tested. Therefore, in due time, God will bring about the end of death and suffering and disease and wickedness, restore the lives lost and return everything to a perfect state. After having answered, for once and for all, the question of whether or not mankind can rule itself God can rule over the perfect creation in perfect justice. The end.

Notice the use of the Hidden Harmony and Eschatological defenses and the implicit involvement of the Disciplinary defense. Suffering is part of God's bigger plan (his vindication of his sovereignty and the eternal well-being of the

whole universe that will result from his divine rulership). This is the Hidden Harmony. Sure, God's allowance of evil seems terrible but on the larger scale it's for the greater good. The Eschatological defense is partnered with the Hidden Harmony defense by promising that even the evil itself will be negated in the future paradise. This means that there was never really any evil attributable to God at all, just the temporary illusion of it. Some, but not all, evil that takes place is actually Godly justice in action, or discipline. This may seem like suffering to those who experience it but it is, of course, for the betterment of all. The remainder of suffering is the fault of mankind and of Satan, not God, and is therefore not disciplinary.

This theology (I now realize) allows no room for either the free-will or ontological defenses because it posits an initially perfect creation. The ontological defense claims that evil is required to understand good, that the imperfect must exist in order for the perfect to be appreciated. This is directly undermined, however, by the Biblical concept that God made the creation perfect and intends to return it to perfection. How else are you supposed to understand a scripture like Revelation 21:3, 4 which says, roughly: 'The tent of God will be with mankind and they will be his peoples. And he will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither mourning, nor outcry, nor pain will be anymore. The former things have passed away.' If the creation hadn't fallen into imperfection, it would have stayed perfect just like God. If returned to perfection in the future the state would still be true. Does this mean that God would stop being perfect and just if the creation was no longer imperfect? No. So, logically, if God plans to return the universe to perfection than imperfection is not necessary for the existence of perfection. Either it is necessary and permanent or unnecessary and temporary and the Bible claims it's temporary so either goodbye Bible or goodbye ontological defense.

Free will also falls in this theology. I mean, it still exists, it simply is not an excuse for suffering and pain. According to this view, free will was given to Adam and Eve and Satan and everybody else (angels, as-yet-uncreated-beings-on-other-planets-in-the-future) and is not responsible for evil and suffering. Had God chosen to, he could have immediately destroyed Adam and Eve and Satan when they all sinned. They exercised their free will to sin, he exercised his to kill them for it. The reason he did not kill them immediately was because there had as yet been no legal precedent set for the action. The

creation was new and while free will was allowed, the consequences of it had not been fully explored yet. By allowing people to use their free will however they wanted for a limited time, God was laying the groundwork for his right to use divine justice in the future. Free will is not to blame and in the future, a perfect world without suffering and death will not come about because of the removal of free will. Rather, God will be free to (for example) kill a person just before he murders another person, knowing that that person had used their free will for murder but sparing the victim the consequence of the act. By legally establishing his right to rule (the Hidden Harmony behind the suffering and death) he will be able to function not as a controller who destroys free-will, but rather as a super-cop to stop it's negative consequences. You'll remain free to try to shoot your neighbor in the head but a) you'll be perfect so you won't want to and b) even if you did, God could stop the bullet and smite you for trying. So, yes, free will leads to some evil but it's not the fundamental cause and evil can be abolished while free will continues to exist, at least according to this particular theology.

Now, I don't personally believe in God and if you read my blog you probably already know that. So, why bother discussing these things? Mostly I like working through conceptual problems and this is a biggie. Also, I've spent many years of my life using this particular defense of God and believing both in Him (I always think it's funny that you capitalize the pronouns when referring to God, but it's generally accepted as correct English) and in the rightness of what He was doing. I mean, stepping back from our little planet here and trying to see the REALLY big picture (by which I mean the entire cosmos) all the human suffering ever to occur is nothing compared to the idea of trillions of populated planets with quadrillions of sentient creatures, living for all eternity under divine rule. If lovely lonely little earth is the cosmic court case, the proving ground for the establishment of universal justice, than individual human rights are fairly meaningless. The suffering and pain and death are just teeny-tiny temporary blips on the face of a teeny-tiny little planet in a teeny-tiny stretch of time that only appear to be a big deal to us because we too are so teeny-tiny. I couldn't just reject such a comforting and apparently rational explanation for all the worlds ills without reason and I am writing this because I want to explain and explore those reasons. I've given a lot of thought to this question and I've found that despite it's initially satisfying appearance, this solution to the problem of evil doesn't work, and here's why.

In order for the Hidden Harmony involved in this theology to make sense, the key issue of the perfect justice of God needs to be established for once and for all. If this issue fails to be established, then the court case is a failure and the suffering of humankind is meaningless. So, is the court case being conducted fairly? Is the issue that is supposedly on trial actually being tested by the suffering of humanity? Well, let's look at the culprits in the drama, Adam, Eve, Satan and any angels who agreed with their decision to test God. They supposedly raised an issue, via their rebellion, of whether or not God had a right to rule. God then removed his divine support and sin and imperfection followed. Inevitably death followed on the heels of sin because as Romans 6:23 says, death is the wage paid for sinning.

The first thing that needs to be identified in order to see why this conception fails is to get at the core question which has always, in my experience, been generally phrased as "Can man successfully rule themselves without God or do they need him?" The question should really be rephrased, however, as, "Could perfect man successfully have ruled themselves without God or did they need him?" See, if the conception of a "perfect man" were a reality, if the universe was really created in perfection, than Adam, Eve and Satan were perfect at the time that they "sinned" (on a side note: the definition of sin apparently was, in this case, exercising their free will in a manner that was not according to God's will). So, you see, they did not raise the question of whether imperfect, flawed humanity could make it's own decisions successfully since they themselves were not imperfect or flawed until after God made them so. But wait, you might ask, couldn't making a decision that was not in harmony with God's will cause imperfection automatically as a side effect perhaps? Maybe God wasn't threatening punishment, but simply warning them about how things were? This argument fails because if using free will in a way inconsistent with God's wishes automatically causes imperfection than free will can't possibly exist in a perfect universe. The moment somebody (even by accident) makes a decision that goes against the divine will, the universe is no longer perfect.

No, making a decision that is not in harmony with God's express will cannot have (in and of itself) the ability to cause imperfection in any universe where free will actually exists so God had to have inflicted the imperfection on them as punishment. This means that the issue related to mankind's sovereignty versus God's was only relevant to perfect mankind. By cursing humankind with imperfection, by causing it to be inheritable, God was staging a mock



trial. He was trying a different question altogether, the question of "Can imperfect, limited and crippled mankind rule itself?". Furthermore, he didn't stay hands off in the affair, according to the Bible, but actively participated in it. He played favorites, smote those he wished to, killed, redeemed, judged and fooled around with the course of human events to get the results he wished. This is not a just trial.

Let me illustrate. If somebody came to me and said, I can run the 100 meter dash in under 10 seconds, I could say, "That's impossible. Let's put that to the test" and allow them to run the race. If they were successful I would have to admit that their claim was a true one, if unsuccessful the matter would be decided that they could not do it. (Yes, I'm over-simplifying, since they could train and try again, but let's just stick with the example). Now, let's say that just before they decided to run I switched their track shoes with lead boots filled with shards of broken glass and covered the track in burning pitch? Would I be putting their claim to the test? What if I instead redefined the definition of a meter or a second to be say, twice the length for the former and half the length for the latter? Would this be a fair test of their claim? Obviously not. The deck would be stacked against them. Perhaps on a normal track in normal track shoes without lacerated feet they could actually run 100 meters in under 10 seconds, but a flawed test does nothing to settle the question.

In a similar way it makes no sense that God could create sentient beings with free will who are made both a) in his image and b) in perfection, punish them for using their free will contrary to his wishes, place their descendants under a fundamental state of imperfection from birth and allow the imperfect descendants to suffer and die in order to prove that he has the right to rule over a perfect creation. This "test" doesn't put the central question to the test at all. It is contrary to logic, reason and basic human justice that God can change all the initial conditions in which the question was raised and call it a legitimate solution to the question when it (obviously) fails. Not only does the central question not get put to the test by this situation, but God even tampers with the test according to the Bible by choosing favorite people to bless, enemies to punish, killing babies and children, drowning Pharaohs and all sorts of other stuff. He is in no way "hands off" and humanity is not immune from His influence (both positive and negative). Again, by being involved in all aspects of the history of an intentionally flawed humanity God (according

to the Bible) completely screws up any chance of answering the question posed by the rebellion in Eden. Who knows if perfect humankind could possibly have governed themselves? The situation has never been put to the test, God has never let humankind live in their initial perfect state and stayed hands off. The whole concept is contradicted by the very Bible story from which it is drawn.

Where does this leave what I like to call the "Court Case" version of the Hidden Harmony theodicy? If it were true, if this were really in essence a universal court case, then it would be a mistrial. The test is wrong, the defendant has changed all the rules and mucked around with the proceedings, the issue cannot possibly be decided by the sufferings and deaths of millions of flawed humans.

The best news of all, for what it's worth, is that we human beings are not descended from some sinning pair of people in a garden. There is no divine court case. The story is a myth and the whole concept of inherited sin is a Judeo-Christian construction of ideas to try to make us feel better about why we go against our own natures and why we do things that lead to bad consequences, why natural disasters and illness kill people and why the universe seems to be conspiring against us. It may seem sad to think that perhaps it is just chaos and apparently random cause and effect that are behind the difficulties of life but it's a lot more tolerable than to think that we're suffering unjustly in a cosmic miscarriage of justice just to give God the right to kill us if we use our free will in a way he disapproves of. That story paints a bad picture of God the merciful and just and also paints a bad picture for us as human beings. Feeling as if we are cursed from the cradle to the grave is a horrible disincentive to do things with our lives. It makes life feel pointless until such time in the future as we are rescued. There is no evidence we will ever be rescued so isn't it better to feel that life has a real point right now? Isn't it better to feel that what you do today for your fellow humans matters?

**Ryan's Bible Commentary: Genesis 1:1-2:3**  
**Wed, 16 Mar 2005 17:07:00 +0000**

The Bible is a source of confusion, resentment, morality, immorality, judgement and mercy. It's been used to defend just about every course of action imaginable and to alternately condemn all those same courses of action. I have

been chided for my lack of respect for the book, for not considering it to be the word of God. Rather than take the abstract view, I decided I will just start blogging about the book and analyzing the various bits and pieces as I go. This will be the Bible as I see it.

I wasn't sure exactly where to start with this process since the Bible itself is available in so many translations. I personally have eight translations at my fingertips right this second and online access to many more although to be honest, none of them is right since they all suffer from one major problem... they aren't the book that was written originally. Translations are translations and they make assumptions, alterations and guesses that alter the original meanings of the text dramatically. For example, the following two sentences mean the same thing but read dramatically differently:

He rested on his bottom reading a ribald magazine.

He sat on his ass reading porn.

Notice, they mean the same thing but the first is written in much better taste than the second. Both might be rendered into a second language in the same way by a translator who wanted to present a certain image of the person being written about. Subtleties of language are readily apparent to people who use the language on a regular basis, but the languages the Bible was written in are so far removed from their original places and cultures that the subtleties of meaning are often lost and have to be guessed at by translators. So it's no surprise that from the very beginning the Bible is a source of conflict and alternate interpretation. Nobody really knows what a scripture actually meant to the person writing the words in the first place. How could they know? They weren't there and the subtleties are gone.

This is, to my mind, a major strike against the claim that the Bible comes from God. I can't believe that he would allow his book to be so full of alternate views and ideas from the very first verse. Anyhow, translation is obviously an issue, so what I have done is this. I have purchased the New Oxford Annotated Bible (to go along with the other seven translations I have at my disposal) and I have decided to use it as my main translation because:

a) it is generally considered to do a relatively accurate job at rendering the original meanings and when a verse can be read in multiple ways it provides the alternate readings

b) it does not endorse or promote any particular Bible viewpoint

c) the annotations are scholarly, up-to-date and sound

It doesn't provide the full picture of everything as you're reading it as it still puts a Christian world-view on things and hides the intricacies of the original language usage (such as puns, rhymes and other subtleties lost in translation) but it's about the best English one I've found. With all that in mind, on to Genesis...

Overview of Genesis

I had previously been raised to think that Genesis was written by Moses in the wilderness about 1450 BCE. This is just plain wrong. Incorrect. Silly, in fact. It is, however, what many people still believe, so I will summarize the two sides of the argument with the following table:

Evidence In Favor of Moses Writing Genesis	Evidence In Favor of A Lot of People Writing Genesis Long After Moses Was Dead
Tradition	Mentions of places that didn't exist until hundreds of years later
Tradition	Use of camels as beasts of burden which didn't happen until hundreds of years later
Tradition	Obvious differences in language, names given to God, style, etc...
Tradition	Contradictions that only clear up when you consider that there were multiple writers and an editor
Tradition	The sum total weight of the convergence of data from all modern archeological and textual analysis related to the time period and text of Genesis

The view that Genesis was written by Moses isn't held by many people any more except people who are ignorant of a) archeology and b) the actual contents of the book of Genesis<sup>130</sup>. Sadly, it's these people who are most ignorant who tend to use Genesis as a club to beat other people with. The less you know about the Bible, the more you are likely to use it to treat other people like crap it seems (and yes, I mean you, fundamentalists... learn about your own damn book).

To somebody like me, there is no shock or shame in the revelation of science, archeology and textual analysis that the Genesis myths in chapters 1 through 11 are actually just that, myths<sup>131</sup>. They came from earlier myths from Sumer, as logically they would because the people who wrote them were descended from the very same folks. The earliest Bible stories refer to God by the name El, which was actually not a synonym for the word God but was a name, a proper name, like Odin or Zeus... in fact, exactly like Odin or Zeus since El was the name of the top God in the Canaanite pantheon. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it's been discovered that the Isrealites weren't monotheistic at first, but rather were (gasp!) pagan, just like the rest of the culture they started in. At first El was not the same god as Yahwah/Jehovah/YHWH/Senor Tetragrammaton. No, that was a later whitewashing, fixing, cleaning up if you will. That is part of the subtlety that is lost in translation that I was talking about. In the original languages it's much clearer that this religion had pagan roots, that they adopted El, invented YHWH and later tried to say they had been the same all along. It's so much easier when you can just call say GOD wherever either word appears to make it "more understandable" for the modern reader but this already means that the original meaning has been lost before you do anything at all. I mean, if two people wrote two stories about two different Gods at different time periods and they were eventually combined into one book (which is what happened) the logical thing to do would be to say that both names referred to the same god, right? That's what happened in Genesis so actually understanding Genesis would be easiest if it were split back apart, but it seems unlikely to happen anytime soon. Maybe it will someday.

So, I mentioned that Genesis starts with controversy, so let's get into it...

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<sup>130</sup>The Watchtower Society maintains that Moses wrote Genesis

<sup>131</sup>In early 2004 there was quite a bit of shock in this realization, but by this point I had gotten used to it and was determining how I could still keep the Bible in my life in some sense

## Genesis 1:1-2:3

### or "The Bible Gets Off On the Wrong Foot

What could possibly be questionable about Genesis 1:1? It's just "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", right? Not so fast, buffalo breath. Genesis 1:1 is the subject of some debate because nobody actually knows if it is supposed to be "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" or "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" and the "when" makes a world of difference. Without the "when" the creation is coming out of nowhere. With it, God is working with the watery void, crafting order out of chaos. Which is it? Was there already matter and chaos or was there nothing? You might think the Bible is clear on this, but in actuality, it's not. The very first sentence of the Bible is hazy in it's meaning and it's haziness could lead to the belief that God didn't create the universe, but rather provided it with shape, or it could be used to support the idea that there was nothing until God made it or, if you study the original languages and the parallels to the Babylonion Enuma Elish, it can simply be seen as a retelling of the Babylonion creation myth. These questions have been debated for centuries and they lead to massively different theological outlooks. My point here is not to push my view (I support number three, BTW, and consider the whole story a retelling of the older myth, thereby proving nothing about the creation of the world but telling lots about the history of Jewish culture) but rather to point out to anybody who thinks that the word of God is clearly stated in the Bible that it most definitely is not. The book starts off fuzzy and doesn't get much better after that at making itself clear. This has to make any logically minded person skeptical of it as a communication from God.

Additionally, the creation story presented in the beginning of the Bible contradicts the second creation story that comes in chapter two AND the fossil record by being completely wrong on the order of creation and by presenting the completely absurd idea that there was an ocean in the sky separated by a metal dome with windows in it from the land. This was not metaphorical language. The word translated "firmament" literally meant a metal dome, hammered brass. Anybody reading those words back in the past would have taken them to mean that the sky was a solid metal dome above their heads which held back the waters above. It is only because science has helped

modern humans understand that the sky is not a metal dome that we no longer labor under that silly delusion. Thank you science. However, it is modern religious thought that causes the original meaning of those words to be obscured. No thank you religion.

Another subtlety lost in the translation is that GOD is actually a rendering of the word ELOHIM, which technically means "GODS". It's a plural. Now, later monotheistic traditions in Judaism have decided to say that the plural was just a way to denote majesty, but archaeology and logic give a different picture. If the Israelites were originally believers in multiple gods, it is only logical that when they used the word for "Gods" they meant just that, Gods.

So, my attempt at paraphrasing the Genesis creation account in a way that takes all this into account and makes the, erm, difficulties, with the text clear would be something like the following take on Genesis 1:1-8, as it probably would have been understood by a reader at the time it was written:

"In the beginning, THE GODS (ELOHIM, hereafter rendered as THE GODS) created the heavens and earth. (Or maybe they didn't really, maybe the earth and heavens were already there and this next bit only describes what the earth was like when they got to it. It's a little unclear.) But regardless of whether it was created from nothing or whether it was just this way when this part happened, the earth was a formless void and it was dark all over the face of the deep (TEHOM: Doesn't that word TEHOM make you think of Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess representing oceanic chaos in the original version of this story? It probably should, but you might miss that in translation, but I digress.) Back to the point... the earth was a formless void while a wind (yes, "wind", air the word used means air when it's used in other places, it means air here regardless of some people's desire to read "spirit" or "active force" here, it's just plain old wind being blown by THE GODS) from THE GODS swept over the face of the waters. Then THE GODS said, "Let there be light" and there was light. And THE GODS saw that the light was good; and THE GODS separated the light from the darkness. THE GODS called the light day and the darkness night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day. And THE GODS said, "Let there be a hammered metal dome between the upper waters and the lower waters." So, THE GODS made the dome and separated the waters above the dome from the waters below it. And it was so. THE GODS called the dome Sky."

Now, you might read this and think, "well that sounds pretty primitive". There isn't a metal dome in the sky (no matter what Martin Luther thought) and I'm pretty certain there is only one GOD in the Bible. You think these things because you have the benefit of looking back over a multi-millennium religious tradition in which these things have been so added to and translated and reworked that you don't even have the original flavor around any more. The desire to turn this into a harmonious work about a monotheistic God that spells out his long term plan for mankind removes the ability to see it for what it actually was when written, what it actually is. This account is a great example of what I'm talking about. With just a few changes that render it more closely in line with what the original writers actually wrote, it becomes almost unrecognizable to a modern Christian. It certainly isn't the type of "accurate history" that creationists claim. Not only is there no metal dome in the sky but the entire order of creation is also wrong. Add to this that the language is polytheistic and derived from the older Sumerian and Babylonian myths and you it is pretty clear that the modern conception of what the first Genesis creation account means, what it is, is wrong. It's a nice story, it's a good record of where the Israelites came from, but it ain't a story about Jehovah creating the universe. It's lots of things, but it isn't that.

Interestingly, this initial seven day creation story is only one of two creation stories in the Bible. I'll get to the second one in my next post.

**Anonymous**  
**2005-05-16 06:49:00**

This writer may be well researched and I see no problems with his argument save, one (well actually a several others).

1. Does it really matter whether the Bible is inerrant or not? The Bible does not make such a claim nor does it demand such a loyalty. The Bible merely attempts to transmit the experience of God from one soul to another. It reveals what God has sought to do or what a particular person or people have experienced.

2. Did Moses write Genesis? Why not? Now that does not mean that he was there and got the facts right but the Bible is not about facts but about faith. Yes, Moses could have written [sic] the foundation for Genesis by putting down on paper or whatever, the tribal stories about Abraham and Noah and creation. Then maybe somewhere on down in history someone else may have taken what Moses wrote and rewrote it again. Just think about all the books written [sic] about the American civil war, were all of



those writers there? No, but they work from material from that time and written [sic] about that time.

I could go on but you may not even hear what I have already tried to express.

May God Bless

### **Ryan's Bible Commentary: Genesis 2:4-2:24**

**Thu, 17 Mar 2005 11:02:00 +0000**

#### **Authors Note:**

There are a few things I want to talk about before I get into a discussion of the text of Genesis 2:4-2:25, i.e. Creation Part Deux. The first has to do with a branch of theological studies called "apologetics". Apologetics is the field of study that attempts to resolve apparent inconsistencies, contradictions and basic mistakes in the Bible. Such a field of apologetics is necessary because of the fact that the Bible contains obvious contradictions, mistakes, anachronisms and inconsistencies but according to literalists 2 Timothy 3:16,17 means the whole thing is infallible when it says, "All scripture is inspired of God". Don't even get me started on 2 Timothy quite yet... it's a whole 'nother can o' worms there since it wasn't even written (most likely) by Paul and the "scriptures" referred to didn't refer to the Bible we have, thereby rendering that claim to be pretty groundless. Still, you don't need to attack 2 Timothy in order to see that apologetics are a self-defeating exercise.

If this book were actually of supernatural origin, it seems highly unlikely that apologetics would be required. After all, here's the reasoning used by fundamentalists. See if you can spot the flaw:

The Bible is God's inspired word. We know this because of it's amazing harmony, consistency, accuracy and supernatural wisdom. Because it is God's inspired word, it is free from error and does not contradict itself.

If it appears to contradict itself, other scriptures can be used to work out the meaning of the apparent contradiction because the book explains itself.

See what this means? The Bible is its own authority. If it is contradicted by itself (which is obviously impossible if it's the perfect work of a perfect God) then a reasoned resolution to the conflict should be reachable through using other parts of the Bible. If it is contradicted by reality, (i.e. - no metal dome in the sky) then it can be reinterpreted. Apologetics, therefore, is the weaseling out of the fact that without apologetics the Bible quite obviously is not infallible or consistent. Now, I ask you, how can a skeptic like myself accept the idea that God would create a book that appears to be wrong to people who aren't up to speed with all the crazy apologetic defenses for why it really isn't? If you attempt to decide if the Bible is divinely inspired by reading it critically, you'll likely decide it isn't. However, if you start with the idea that it is divinely inspired then no mistake in it, no flaw, no contradiction is too big for you to find some insane way to explain away. I personally believe that any communication from God would be obviously correct and the energy would have to be expended in trying to find reasons it was wrong, not the reverse.

However, as you're about to see, the Bible not only starts off on a very questionable foot, it immediately shifts gears and flatly contradicts itself.

Genesis 2:4-2:25

or Apologetics Gets Invented

If you have already read my entry about Genesis 1:1-2:3 you may have noticed that I left a few things out. I made reference to the fact that the order of events in the initial creation account contradicted not only science but also the second creation account. This, as I mentioned previously, should not be possible. Enter the first good chance for apologetics. I also avoided mention of some seemingly backwards aspects of the supposed creation account (like light being created before the light sources were) because I wanted to cover all of that in this little tour of apologetics.

In the initial chapter of Genesis, there are 6 creative days and on they go like this:

Day 1: A beginning, a primordial earth, light, then darkness

Day 2: A metal dome splits the waters above and below

Day 3: Dry land is separated from the waters under the dome, plants grew on earth including fruit bearing plants with seeds

Day 4: The sun, moon and stars are added to the dome to serve "as signs"

Day 5: Birds and sea monsters are brought forth from the seas

Day 6: Cattle, insects and wild animals on the earth are created, then mankind is created male and female in the likeness of God to rule over all the animals and plants

Day 7: God took the day off

Let's compare that to the order of events in Genesis 2:

1. God makes the earth and heavens, but there are no plants yet, even though God waters the land
2. God makes man from the dust of the ground
3. God planted a garden in Eden for the man he made
4. God made trees grow in the garden
5. God tells Man to be a farmer
6. God decides to make man a helper and makes, not woman, but animals
7. God makes woman out of man's rib
8. He never really rests, just keeps on as a character in the story

In the first story the order of creation is the earth-> plants-> birds and fish -> animals -> man and woman but in the second story it goes the earth-> man-> plants -> trees -> animals -> woman. This is where apologetics folks roll up their sleeves and start the spin. "It's not really a contradiction", they say. "One is chronological, the other is just telling the story from a human perspective." to which I say, "you're full of crap" and here's why.

There is simply no way to read the words at Genesis 2:5 and not equate it with day 2 of the creative days. It says:

"In the day that the Yahweh God made the earth and heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no field had yet sprung up"

This is obviously stating an exact time period. After earth was made, before plants. OK. So, what happens next? After mentioning that it hadn't rained yet in 5b and 6, it goes on to say:

"... then the Yahweh God formed man from the dust of the ground"

And what happened next?

"And the Yahweh God planted in a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed."

It's a very clear order of events. The earth, man, a garden. The language is direct and reads no other way. Why, I ask you, would somebody attempt to reconcile these two accounts as harmonious? Because the alternative is unthinkable. The alternative is also, honestly, quite obvious. The alternative is that the second creation account was originally a separate story from a separate source that was put together by an editor with the first story. You can even spot the editors work if you look closely, it's the bit at the beginning of verse 4. Here's the transition, paraphrased to show stylistic differences more easily:

"So, THE GOD(S) blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it THE GOD(S) rested from all the work done in creation.

These are the generations of the heavens and earth when they were created.

In the day that the Yahweh God made the earth and heavens, when there weren't any plants or herbs yet growing anywhere - because the Yahweh God hadn't made the rain yet and besides, nobody was around to till the ground; but there was a steam that would rise up from the earth and water the ground - then the Yahweh God made man from the dust of the ground..."

Notice how the first story is regal and grand and epic and fairly stilted in it's language. Then there is this one little sentence that sort of segues into the next part and suddenly it's all folksy and cozy and using much more rustic and personal language. Part one up there is the "Priestly" writer, the middle sentence is the infamous "Redactor" and the third part is the "Yahwist" author. The idea that these contradictory accounts were written by the same man, dictated by God almighty and he just so happened to change the way he referred to God, the tone of his writing, the order of the events he's describing and every major part of his story all in the space of 2 verses is extremely difficult to swallow but it's exactly what must be swallowed in order to accept the apologetics explanation for all of this. Especially when a far more satisfying explanation exists in which these were originally separate accounts joined together. It is the only explanation that actually makes sense.

Further, the understanding that Israel was originally not monotheistic makes the "let's make man in our image" terminology much more logical, makes the use of the phrase "the Yahweh God" which is translated in most Bibles as "the LORD God" logical too. You had to identify which god you meant (the Yahweh God) when talking about gods if you believed in a pantheon of them. These verses all make sense as parts of the early Jewish tradition, formed out of their earlier Babylonian history but make no sense as holy writ from on high.

Why does this matter? It matters because people who believe that this is an accurate depiction of how life started on this planet are attempting to subvert reality and the government in this country even today. They don't understand their own book and yet they can use it to try to dictate reality to the rest of the world. Sad.

One final point I want to make before I step out of creation-land and into the Garden of Eden is a summary of the ways in which Genesis contradicts reality (besides simply contradicting itself). Both creation accounts are wrong on the order in which things appeared on this planet.

Contrary to Genesis 1, there is not firmament, no dome, no metal in the sky, no "waters above". There are clouds, air and space. Second, there were living organisms on earth long before plants. Plants came after ocean creatures, not before. Fish, in a word, predate land plants. Birds came way way way after the plants, yes, but not before land animals. They say plants-&gt;fish and

birds-&gt;land animals but it is actually ocean life-&gt;some plants-&gt;land animals-&gt;more plants with fruit-&gt;birds. There were already lots of insects and land animals before birds ever showed up. Sure man came near the end, in the fossil record, but other animals have shown up since the earliest humans. We're not the most recent new species in the fossil record. Creation didn't stop with us.

Genesis 2 is equally wrong. Man was not the first creation, almost every thing that has ever lived on this planet lived before anything remotely human. We weren't here before the plants and animals and women were not created from man's rib.

In short, creationists who claim this account gives amazing proof of the supernatural source of it's message because of it's amazing accuracy are just dead wrong. Apologists who think the two accounts can be reconciled are also dead wrong. These accounts tell us where the Jewish people came from and the nature of early Jewish thought about cosmology, nothing more, nothing less.

## **Myanmar**

**Tue, 22 Mar 2005 14:15:00 +0000**

My brother-in-law Hiromi (my sister's hubby) has a great little blog. On this blog he posts all sorts of interesting things and I read it regularly. His latest post makes me sad. He talks about a girl he works with from Burma. Burma (aka Myanmar) is under the control of a brutal regime and the people there are suffering. Hiromi is a good guy, a loving caring guy, so he wants to help. He offers help by sharing a couple of scriptures with her (Daniel 2:44 and Isa 9:6,7) and says, "It's nice to be able to show people from their own copy of the Bible that a new government is on its way and that it promises to solve the issues we haven't been able to".

This perfectly illustrates something that bothers me tremendously. Here we have a case of a good, sincere man who is sharing his sincerely held belief in an attempt to comfort another person. How can I have a problem with that? Simple. I have a problem because there are actual people actually suffering and dying right now here in reality and the belief in the fantasy concept of imminent rescue, while comforting, keeps a person from actually doing

anything to make reality any better. This causes good people (like my family members) to feel good about doing something that is ultimately negative (teaching myth and fantasy to other people as if it were fact) and every good person so engaged in a pointless, counterproductive activity such as this, no matter how well-intentioned, is one less good person who can make a difference.

The reason that Hiromi feels that there will be a theocratic government to end all problems is that he feels God has promised it. This stems from his belief that a) the words in the Bible are the words of God and b) the interpretation of those words as he understands it is from God. If those things were true they might be a comfort, but the thing that makes me sad is that there is no reason whatsoever to believe that those things are true, that those words are from God or even that those words have the meaning being attributed to them.

For example... The book of Daniel, possibly the most important book in the Bible to "end times" groups like the Witnesses, can in no way conclusively be shown to be anything but a second century forgery. The kingdom promises contained therein that provide Witnesses with hope can be shown clearly to be no more than propaganda intended to make 2nd century Jews suffering under oppression feel better. The supposed prophetic fulfillments past that date, down to our day, including the famed Witness 1914 prophecy, can be shown to be, in all cases, either erroneous or so vague that they could have been considered "fulfilled" by almost anything that happened. No doubt Hiromi is unfamiliar with all the evidence about Daniel, nearly all Witnesses are. The last thing any fundamentalist religion can allow is a frank discussion of the Bible that includes the evidence against it. Something tells me though, that his faith is strong enough that even if he knew about the anachronisms, mistakes, borrowed words, problems with 607 BCE and other pieces of evidence of 2nd century authorship he would still believe in the book of Daniel.

There are two, to me, equally unpleasant possibilities here. First, a person can know about all the evidence against a particular position and the complete lack of evidence in favor of it and trust in themselves and their "faith" to decide it's true anyhow. Or, secondly, a person can be unaware of all the evidence and make their decision about a belief based on incomplete evidence. Nobody wants to be unreasonable and nobody wants to be ignorant, but these are the only possible reasons for believing in Daniel. Either you must be unaware of

the evidence against it or you trust yourself to judge it sound. There is no way to be conclusive on the matter. All available evidence paints Daniel as a 2nd century composition, only faith allows the acceptance of the earlier date that makes it into prophecy instead of forgery.

Now, I picked on Daniel as an example, but the truth is that the Bible is full of references to a future paradisaic time. Hiromi also mentioned one in Isaiah. It's no surprise, if you know anything about Israel's history. It is a common theme for a downtrodden people to write about. The various scriptures about this future golden time all have particular explanations for why they were written and who they were written for that have nothing to do with us living in 2005 in America or Burma or anywhere else. They are the repeated hopes of a suffering people for a happy ending that they didn't get. Time after time after time new groups of people pick through these old promises, these old wishes and say "look, this old book says there's a happy ending coming soon" and other people believe it and it fails to materialize and for some reason, against reason, the hope in it stays. Generation after generation is disappointed. Generation after generation wastes time and effort. It's so sad.

The fantasy is that these are the words of God, intended for us. The reality is that these words were written by men, for men, and not for us. When William Miller decided they were for us in the early 1800's he was sincere but mistaken and tens of thousands of followers wasted years of their lives. When C. T. Russell took Miller's ideas and ran with them in the late 1800's he was sincere but mistaken and the same thing happened. When Rutherford and Knorr and Franz spent the better part of the 1900's refining the interpretations of these scriptures to devise a theology for the "last days" they carried on the legacy of unknowingly wasting the time, energy and love of thousands of good sincere people on a devotion to a fantasy while ignoring reality. Old words, written for long dead people, reinterpreted and reapplied to our day only provide a false hope, an ultimately destructive false hope that distracts from reality and from doing what we can to make reality better. I love Hiromi, I love all my family. I wish they could see what they are doing. It's one thing to have a personal wish or hope for something, it's quite something else to expect it come true and share it with others. This is no way to help the people in Burma or anywhere else.

**Thu, 31 Mar 2005 18:56:00 +0000**



So, yesterday was long and crappy. It was my grandmothers funeral<sup>132</sup> and then there was a little health emergency /scare in the evening. Stressful...

I mean, it could have been worse, a lot worse. The medical scare was just a scare and no fights broke out at Grandma's funeral. This morning on the bus I wrote about the funeral. I wrote this:

I spent yesterday, the first half of it anyway, acting as a pallbearer at my grandmothers funeral. It was in a big Catholic church in Farmington MN. Now, I personally have only ever set foot in a Catholic church one time previously and that was when I popped in on mass over by my house with a notebook to do a little observing and discovered how freakin' weird it was. The chanting, the call and response, the complete and total lack of message (other than "Jesus is Lord"), the absence of Bibles, all caught me by surprise the first time. Not so this time. This time I knew what to expect.

The pastor guy sounded a little like Principle Skinner as he went through all the rituals and motions that were supposed to make sure Grandma went to heaven. It's so odd being at this kind of thing, knowing how everybody else there is infused with faith, or at the very least pretending to believe, that my grandma was in heaven now, hanging around, bowling with God<sup>133</sup>. They offered communion and the guy actually looked a little hurt when he held out the wafer and said, "Body of Christ?" and I said, "No thanks, I'm not a Catholic." Lots of other non-Catholics still take communion, I know, but I don't even believe in Christianity, let alone it's most awkward and bizarre form. Transubstantiation? Puh-lease... In my mind I kept transforming the repeated queries of "Body of Christ?" being offered to each communion taker into "Crispy cracker?". Just change that one thing, have everybody lining up and being asked "Crispy cracker?" and then reverently taking it to commune with their long dead Lord would be absolutely great.

It was definitely my opinion that the Catholic mass /liturgy thing detracted from my grandmothers goodbye, not adding to it. She was a real person who lived a full life and it was good. That is worth celebrating and remembering. Standing around acting pious, performing little rituals and talking about

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<sup>132</sup>My maternal grandmother, Ethelwyn Weisbrich died of old age in a nursing home  
<sup>133</sup>My grandmother was a fantastic bowler

somebody else who died a couple of thousand years ago more than you talk about the woman who died Friday is (to a guy like me) fairly offensive. I would have loved to hear more about grandma and less about a long-dead probably-mythical man who somehow got turned into a divinity decades after his death by posterity and social circumstances. I loved my grandma and I wish her funeral had been more about her, that's all.

Then again, funerals are not for the person who died, they are for the people who live and this one gave my mom, Margie, Pete, Jim, Jay, Joanie, Skip, Gene and Mary<sup>134</sup> a chance to say their goodbyes and act civil before they start feuding over her stuff. Rick and Rosie were both absent, Rick because his daughter (my cousin Karla) broke both of her legs in some sort of accident, Rosie because... well, I have no idea. I've never met the woman and have no clue about anything about her. For all I know she's fictional although my mom claims I learned to walk at her house when I was a toddler. That accounts for eleven of the Brunette children, two of them (Jerry and Jack) are no longer alive so that gets us to the full baker's dozen count of kids that my grandma brought into the world. Thirteen children, raised 'em pretty much by herself too because my grandpa Joe died when my mom was nine and Mary was still a baby. Grandma may not have gotten the sendoff I think she deserved, but all the people around who would not be if not for her are thankful and at least they were there.

There were numerous things about the service I didn't mention that bothered me but really they are just bigger issues with the whole concept of Christianity itself so I guess I'm better off not going into it right now. Besides, with a family as religious as the one I have, it seems entirely possible that they could find some new way to think even less of their heathen relative than they currently do. So, somebody out there in web land, tell me why I ought to be a Christian, save me, convert me, come on, show me something... get me off the hook with my family.

I saw Rhett at the funeral and he was happy about the new computer I put together for him. He only asked me if I would fix it up a little and even that he asked back before I left the Witnesses, but I didn't get it back to him for a long time and I wanted to make sure he got some good use out of it when I finally did so I pimped it out for him. New motherboard, new burner, new RAM, new

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<sup>134</sup>Aunts and uncles on my mom's side of the family

OS, fast fast fast, stable and loaded to the gills exactly how he likes it. I think he's happy. Running Windows 2000 (the only version of Windows that anybody should be running, IMNSHO) and a 2.2 GHZ AMD processor and a gig of RAM or so, that bad boy will be quite the recordin' machine for quite some time to come. Yeah, I think he's happy. I love that guy.

## **Fallacy Lesson #1**

**Thu, 07 Apr 2005 09:38:00 +0000**

The following statement is completely illogical, it is fallacious:

"If the Bible is merely man's word, then logically there is no clear answer to mankind's problems."

Think about it for a second. Does the second half of the sentence actually follow from the first? Is it the only logical conclusion? To illustrate, the following statements (which contradict this one) are actually logical:

"If the Bible is merely man's word, then logically the rest of the world's sacred texts deserve to at least be analyzed to determine if the word of God can be found within them instead."

"If the Bible is merely man's word, then logically we can still use it's contents as a tool to learn about the growth and development of human culture. This in turn may help lead us to a better understanding of ourselves and develop solutions for our future survival."

"If the Bible is merely man's word, then logically we can stop waiting for it's future promises to be fulfilled and direct our energies into improving our world and saving our species instead of wasting our time and energy promoting ancient ideas that are not true."

In short, if the Bible is merely man's word, it still retains value, but the answers to mankind's problems may lie elsewhere. Proving the Bible is merely man's word is not throwing your arms up to hopelessness, it's not even tossing the Bible out. It's not like it's the only book out there or even the best one or that things it says that ARE true stop being true if they are from people. This little sentence is a good example of a fallacy. The conclusion does not follow from

the initial statement. This is not logic. This is fallacy. This particular fallacy is courtesy of the book "The Bible - God's Word or Man's?", chapter 1, paragraph 4.

**Spring**

**Thu, 14 Apr 2005 11:16:34 +0000**

Nice. Sun is out, birds are chirping everywhere, snow is melting. Spring seems to be peeking out from wherever it's been hiding. Lovely. I love mornings like this.

Last night I play at the Acadia Cafe for the third time<sup>135</sup>. This time was, by all accounts, my best gig ever. Nick Barretta opened by playing a few solo acoustic tunes and then he brought up Mike and Tashiki (?) and played a few more. It was sweet. They were really good. Next up was Derek Helland<sup>136</sup> and he (of course) was his usual great self too. The turn out was OK, there were a few people there and it was lots of fun. I played my set and the audience was really supportive and responsive. We did "Why We Need To Show Each Other"<sup>137</sup> and I got everybody to sing along to the chorus. This guy Cam in the audience thought it was the greatest thing in the world. Heh.

Anyhow, I was really comfortable, really happy up there. I think I am developing into a performer. I have always been such a studio guy, being a performer is fun. I'm really glad that I'm finally learning to do it. I always wondered how people can "do it", you know, how they can get on stage and get a crowd on their side. Turns out it's both harder and easier than I suspected. The easy part is that you just need to emphatically be yourself, project yourself to the audience. Play your music enthusiastically, like you mean it and have fun. If you're having fun, they will too. People are so sensitive to what a performer is doing, whether or not they should be happy, sad, excited, bored, whatever is entirely a cue taken from the person on stage. In concept all of this is easy to understand, in reality it's hard. You have to develop confidence with what you're doing up there, develop belief in your ability to entertain people. I have developed that a bit now. I believe I can do this. Last night I wasn't nervous, I was just ready to go and have some fun up

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<sup>135</sup>A music venue in Minneapolis

<sup>136</sup>A former Witness who I have known since he was 8 years old when I used to play in a band with his father

<sup>137</sup>A song from the album I was working on recording at the time, "Songs of Bo Redoubt"

there. I think the more fun I am having, the more the audience likes it. At least, that's what I think is happening.

### **validating the invalid**

**Wed, 04 May 2005 11:46:41 +0000**

Alright, I'm convinced that it's now time that something is done about the fact that human society gives way too much leeway to invalid and superstitious ideas out of respect for tradition. It's gone on long enough. People believe all sorts of odd things but they don't just pull these beliefs out of thin air. They learn them from parents and teachers and friends who likewise learned them from others and passed on the things they heard. This process of when it spans generations is what we call tradition and tradition has absolutely NO INHERENT VALIDITY AT ALL. Tradition does not verify whether a belief is true or false, it simply validates that previous people believed it. This process needs to stop being respected and start being counteracted. Invalid and incorrect ideas passed down through the generations by tradition are not just a nuisance, they are actually a major hindrance to the progress of the entire species and a danger to the planet.

The Bible is the ultimate example. Archaeology and textual analysis over the last 200 years have established as all but a dead certainty that the core of the Hebrew Bible (including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Joshua, Kings, Chronicles and lots more) was constructed and largely written as a political propaganda tool of King Josiah in the 7th century BCE. The patriarch stories? Made up. The Flood? Folk tale. The exodus from Egypt? Never happened. Conquest of Canaan? Think again. The Judges? Myth and legend. Nephilim? Tower of Babel? Eden? Myth, myth, myth. Some of the myths are very old, predating Israel by 1000 years or more, some of them are Israelite versions of popular stories, some may reflect actual oral traditions that might reflect something that may have actually happened somewhere. A king recognized the power of the written word in the 7th century, he used it to unite his people. He did too good a job of it. How long did it take before people figured out what he had done? 2700 years, give or take a few. Why? Because these stories, once granted validity by the first people who heard them, continued to be related down through the years. Nobody stopped and asked, "did these things really happen?" because the invalid, mythical and contrived story was granted the ultimate respect. It's a powerful story, yes, it provides a

small, persecuted group of people with an identity, yes, but it's also caused countless wars and atrocities, lead to people being killed simply for daring to believe in reality when it conflicted with the story and today, 2700 years after the fact, in another country in another age, even after the story has been revealed for what it is, it has caused a seemingly irreparable wound between myself and my family because I know what it is and they think that makes me evil. It is behind the brain-dead decisions of a brain-dead commander in chief. It has been co-opted, used, abused, expanded, applied, reapplied and been used to promote a fictional bronze-age tribal deity into the ultimate lord of all the universe. Way to go Josiah. Nice one.

People say the Bible is the word of God. I say it's more like those email chain letters that never die because people keep believing them and passing them on without stopping to investigate them. People believe everything they read. Doubly so when they are a persecuted, ignorant, bronze-age peasant group who is given the assurance of a politician (their king) that this is true. Honest. It is. Swear it. The Bible is the ultimate hoax, the ultimate spoof, the ultimate "FORWARD THIS TO TEN PEOPLE YOU KNOW IT REALLY WORKS, HONEST!!!!". It's blundered it's way through history for 2700 years, granted a status it never deserved, elevated into something it never was and warped the entire culture of the country I live in. There are people fighting against reality actively, daily, afraid that understanding biology and history will endanger their immortal souls. There are people who are proud of being pig ignorant and who will never pick up any book that does tell them that what they already think is true. These people want to control what is taught, they want to wreck the environment to get God here more quickly, these are dangerous, delusional viewpoints and they want them to represent reality. You can't define reality. Reality is there. You can only accept it when it contradicts the crap you were taught.

I bet if I could go back in time and take Josiah on a trip to see all the trouble he was about to cause when he got this ball rolling (and no, he's not responsible for the whole Christian Bible, obviously, just the early parts, but they're the beginning) I bet he would reconsider using this method to unite his empire. His attempts at expansion failed, he was killed, his invention of propaganda has haunted us ever since.

"CONVERT 10 PEOPLE YOU KNOW AND LIVE FOREVER! IT REALLY WORKS! I TRIED IT!!!!"

This has got to be stopped, somehow...

## **The Challenge of Non-Theism**

**Mon, 16 May 2005 20:06:57 +0000**

Yesterday Esther and Syd and I went to The First Universalist Church in Minneapolis instead of the First Unitarian Society (FUS) that we've been going to<sup>138</sup>. It was interesting because it so clearly illustrated what, until that point, I had only read about which is the markedly different personalities of the various UU congregations. While the FUS church is markedly humanist in outlook, the FUC was definitely more deistic. I use the word deistic because there was no specific theological ideology presented, but there was definitely a message presented in the sermon that was far more supernatural than at FUS. The minister talked about angels, God and "something beyond us that cares for us". It bugged me.

The reason it bugged me was difficult for me to figure out at first. I mean, there is the obvious whole "I don't believe in the supernatural and this church is supposed to respect that" thing but it was more than that. I was also bothered by comments made by the president of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, in a letter he sent in response to an open letter to him from Rebecca Parker (another UU minister, I believe) that was posted in the social hall at the church. Es and I had a good discussion about what bothered us about the service and also about the comments by Sinkford and in the course of that conversation I came to some realizations and understandings that I would like to comment on here.

A few things first, in case you haven't read my blog before or have only read parts of it, I am an atheist. For most of my life I was a believer in Jehovah, the god of the Judeo-Christian bible. I was not, contrary to many (most?) believers, an intuitive believer in this god, but rather a "rational believer". The religion I was raised in, Jehovah's Witnesses, is very diligent in it's use of apologetics to give reasons to believe. They publish books with their ideas on

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<sup>138</sup>After taking a test on the Internet called the Belief-O-Matic I had discovered a place where non-believers with an interest in humanism and religion could meet and spend time with others of their ilk, the Unitarian Universalist Association. Es and Syd and I began sporadically attending the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis initially out of curiosity and eventually because we made some friends and I started to play in the band

creationism, comparative religion, prophecy and bible infallibility and these books go a long way towards convincing Witnesses that their beliefs are based on reason and rationale as opposed to "blind faith" or "credulity". That was one of the attractions of Jehovah's Witnesses for me, probably the main one. By nature I am a rationalist first, everything else second. As a kid in middle school I remember telling people that if I were not raised a Jehovah's Witness I would have probably been an atheist because I was never drawn to the concept of god or to religion. I didn't tell my parents that, of course, but it was the truth. I became convinced of the truth of the Bible and Jehovah's Witnesses interpretation of it in 1985 at the age of 12 when I read their book "Life-How Did it Get Here? By Evolution of Creation?" and was impressed by the logic and evidence. Other books like "Mankind's Search for God" and "Revelation-It's Grand Climax at Hand" further cemented my beliefs. The part about religion and belief in god I always had a problem with was that I never really felt god, I never really felt internally that there was such a thing, I just trusted the evidence I was given. Last year that melted away when I discovered that the logic in apologetics used by the Witnesses is deeply flawed and fallacious. Since I am a rationalist first at my core, I reverted to my natural state of atheism. Lacking a concrete reason to believe in something that cannot be seen or experienced in any way (except an internal way that I have never personally experienced) I lack belief in it. This is what I mean when I say I am an atheist.

Unlike most believers, I have delved deeply into studying the origins of the ideas contained in the Bible. In the course of my studies I learned about the origins of the belief in the Biblical Jehovah (aka: YHWH, Elohim, El) and the development of the text of the Bible. On some level I actually hoped to find something supernaturally inexplicable but instead discovered a profoundly human and explicable story behind the formation of the Bible, the development of monotheistic belief and the development of Christianity. I'd be lying if I didn't admit to holding on to some shred of hope that I'd find a rational basis for belief all they up until just a few weeks ago when I finally dug far enough back into my research to begin to understand the pre-Hebrew origins of YHWH. I mean, I never considered Ba'al real, I see no reason to hold out any hope that his brother Yahweh is real either. Anyhow, that's a bit of my background. I reached atheism by studying the roots of theism and finding that theism is based on human ideas invented in ignorant and regrettable times. My default state is to not believe something without a reason, god is a pretty huge thing to believe without a reason.



I do not consider myself an agnostic, despite the fact that I don't deny that a god is possible. After all, no rationalist can rule out a logical possibility (namely, that a something/somebody exists that could be called god) but after examining all the so-called evidence in favor of the idea I can safely leave all the known gods (Jehovah/Yahweh and Christ included) in the same dustbin with leprechauns, elves and dragons. Here is what I will say with absolute certainty about god at this point. If such a being exists, it has nothing to do with us OR has never communicated with humans OR is represented by some belief system I have yet to encounter. This being, if it exists, left no obvious sign of it's existence that can be detected by rational means and no discernible message about what, if anything, it wants/wanted. The fact of the matter (as any analysis that includes all the available evidence will attest) is that every single religion and holy scripture can be traced to distinctly human causes and creators. An agnostic position says that god (usually the Biblical one) might or might not exist, it's just unknown. An atheist position says that on consideration of the evidence in favor of god (none) and the evidence for human origin of belief in god (all of it) the idea of god can reasonably be considered a human invention. If new evidence were to arise to provide positive evidence and explain the negative evidence in a way that recasts it in a light that supports the idea of god, then any rationalist would have to go ahead and consider it and change position.

Now, after that lengthy aside, I will get back to my point. As a formerly god-believing atheist I can understand (in a way that believers or people who never believed might not be able to) the viewpoints of both the theistic and atheistic sides of the issue. I can understand why some theistic writers claim that atheists do not actually exist. For example, an essay by a Dr. John Russell states:

"Atheistic rationalizations or systems of belief do exist as abstractions in the minds of human beings. But, Atheists Do Not Exist."

I highly recommend reading his essay because it illustrates just how little believers actually understand about the minds of non-believers. I want to discuss a few of the things in this essay now as another little aside...

First, he claims that there are least three types of atheism:

"1. Practical atheism includes those who have become disillusioned with religion or who choose to ignore God. They live as though there were no God.

2. Dogmatic atheism includes those who openly profess atheism. These people may be militant and will probably have a codified "theology." Examples of dogmatic atheists are the secular humanists, Marxists and certain philosophers. Elaborate rationalizations are required in order to maintain some semblance of personal integrity.

3. Virtual atheism includes those who hold principles that are inconsistent with the belief in God or violate the common use of language. God is defined in such vague terms as, "an active principle in nature," "the social consciousness," "the unknowable," "personified reality," "energy," or "force.""

Notice his choice of words here. The first type, "practical atheism" is described as people who just ignore God out of disillusionment with religion who live as if there is no god. These people exist, certainly, but one would have to wonder if they really are atheists if they still believe but just lack the discipline to follow an organized religion. I guess I would personally put people in this group in the agnostic or even theistic-but-not-religious category. The second group, "dogmatic atheism" is the most interesting as I am a secular humanist (as are most UU folks in the FUS congregation) so it claims to represent me. He claims, "elaborate rationalizations are required in order to maintain some semblance of personal integrity". Now, leaving the completely offensive nature of the comment aside for a moment, notice what this remark tells about the writer. It tells you that writer firmly believes that the default position for all human minds is theistic and that atheists rationalize themselves into non-belief against their own natures. He makes this clear at two other points in his essay in which he claims:

"Anthropologists have found belief in the existence of God in all cultures. Thus, science, history and the Bible concur in the universal belief that God exists. Somewhere deep in the human spirit there is a settled knowledge that God is. If I choose a lifestyle that is opposed to the Bible, then my mind begins to rationalize in an attempt to justify my behavior. This process works automatically on an unconscious level, as well as on a conscious level. This process can be triggered by at least two events: (1) A perceived injustice, in

which the individual gets mad at God, or (2) A deliberate choice of the individual to do wrong."

and

"When there is no longer a psychological "need" to believe in atheism, the mind reverts to a normal theistic belief."

He is quite clearly saying that he believes that the natural state for all human beings is an innate belief in god. What he fails to recognize is that the existence of the belief of god in all CULTURES does not equate to the belief in god in all INDIVIDUALS any more than the presence of a preference for the color red in all cultures would mean that everybody likes the color red. The belief in god is common, maybe even the majority belief, but is far from universal. In fact, the belief in a monotheistic god, such as the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts, is actually a minority view among human kind. More human beings currently alive and having lived throughout history believe in multiple gods or none than believe in a single universal god.

The writer states that atheism is an "arrogant" belief because "the believer must assume that he has an exhaustive knowledge of all things in the universe" but this argument is absurd. An atheist need only have sufficient knowledge of the specific claims of god that they are rejecting. I do not need to know all things in the universe to establish that the Biblical god is a human fiction, I only need sufficient knowledge of the history of the development of Christianity and Judaism and the development of the Bible. If I do not find evidence in that process of a divine hand and if I find positive evidence of purely human motives, I have no choice but to reject that particular concept of god. One, of course, could turn this argument right back at a theist and say that theism is an arrogant position because it assumes a special privileged knowledge of not only the physical universe, but also another metaphysical dimension that can't be found by reason but only through the believers internal "faith".

Before I get back to the main point of this long rambling post, I want to assault one last set of claims this writer makes:

"It is more rational to believe in God, since one can more easily infer the existence of God through limited knowledge.

There are five main areas of evidence:

1. Intuition, which states that the belief in the existence of God exists universally in the human psyche. Even in the atheist's mind, the idea of God necessarily exists in order for him to attempt to disprove the existence of God. When there is no longer a psychological "need" to believe in atheism, the mind reverts to a normal theistic belief.

2. The Jewish and Christian Scriptures assume the existence of God. The scriptures are credible, and therefore are a strong witness for the existence of God.

3. Rational arguments support the existence of God. The first rational argument is the

3.1 Cosmological (Cause-Effect) Argument: Since everything that had a beginning had a cause, the universe itself must have had a cause. To say that matter or energy is eternal is to deny basic human cause-effect thinking, and simply begs the question. The second rational argument is the

3.2 Teleological Argument: The order and design in the universe imply an intelligent and purposeful Creator. The third rational argument is the

3.3 Ontological Argument: The idea of God implies something of what he must be if he exists: infinite and perfect; and since human beings would not conceive of such an idea, the idea must have come from God. Therefore, God exists. The fourth rational argument is the

3.4 Moral Argument: Human beings have a conscience, which tells us what is right and wrong, and urges us to do the responsible thing. If we do right, conscience rewards us. If we do wrong, conscience "punishes" us. Implied is the existence of the creator of conscience, a moral lawgiver, who rewards good behavior and corrects wrong behavior. The fifth rational argument is the

3.5 Argument from Congruity: The theory that best explains the related facts is probably right. The existence of God as described in the Bible best explains the available evidence.

4. A changed life: the most compelling evidence for the existence of God is a changed life. When one accepts Christ as his Savior, his/her life is changed for the better. Drug addictions drop; marriages are saved; love replaces hatred; hope replaces despair; life replaces death. When many receive Christ in a society, society is changed for the better—see Timothy L. Smith's *Revival and Social Reform* for documentation.

5. Cumulative evidence: The cumulative evidence for the existence of God is stronger than any single fact or argument. "

As you can see, he considers the rational position to be theism but each of these arguments proves fallacious. On the first point, the intuitive belief in god does not exist universally. I can personally state that if the idea of god hadn't been taught to me at a very young age, it never would have occurred to me. It's a strange and counter-intuitive idea for me and I had to wrestle to maintain belief in it for years. So, this is an argument from a false premise. The belief in god is not universal and even if it were, human intuition is far from a reliable guide to the way things actually are. Intuition would tell you the sun revolves around the earth, for example, and be dead wrong.

His second point, that the Bible assumes the existence of god and is a credible witness is something I have researched extensively and I can only say that this is silly and demonstrates a lack of understanding about the Bible. The Bible, if examined properly, demonstrates a belief in the existence of multiple gods, developing into the belief in a single one. It shows the development of ideas, but does not demonstrate the truth or falsehood of those ideas. It is contradictory, erroneous on many counts (both historical and scientific) and does not stand up to critical scrutiny. The Bible is strong evidence for the human belief in god but not for the existence. I don't need the Bible to show me that people believe, bumper stickers can prove that rather easily.

Point three brings up some "rational" arguments for god. The first is cosmological, or the law of cause and effect. Since everything has a cause, the universe must, i.e. god. This one is easily demonstrated as silly by asking the question, "what was the cause of God?". Is it more rational to believe that a complex rational cosmic God just happens to exist without cause or to believe that the underlying non-sentient energy of the universe just happens to exist?

One (god) is infinitely complex and the other is not. I find it entirely irrational to believe that infinite complexity and intelligence can "just happen" but that mindless energy has to have a cause. Theists postulate a far less rational idea than non-theists on this front. The second argument, teleological, uses the words "order and design" in reference to the universe. There are many, myself included, who see a balance in the universe between order and chaos, between organization and entropy and with analysis come to realize that the universe is not a symphony of order and purpose but is in fact a series of complex systems that exhibit all the positives and negatives one would expect of complex but mechanistic processes. There is the illusion of design, but it tends to fall apart once the causes for the observed effects are understood. The next argument is odd, it states that because human beings would not have conceived of the idea of a perfect god, therefore he exists because the idea could only have come from him. This is ridiculous. Billions of human beings have lived and they have conceived of pretty much everything that anybody you care to name and the moment you name it, it's been conceived of by a human being. There is nothing to stop a human from conceiving of an infinite and perfect god or a purple leprechaun or a giant turtle supporting the earth. It's called "imagination" and is far from rational. The fourth argument, the moral one, claims that conscience could only come from god. This is incorrect, as the evolutionary forces that would shape the development of conscience are quite well understood. It is a strong survival trait among humans to have a conscience and natural selection has selected for it. This does not argue for god. The final point is the nail in the coffin of theism. Congruity. The theory that best explains the related facts is probably right. The theory of the god of the Bible does not satisfactorily explain any of the available evidence, although the evidence clearly supports the idea of the human development of belief in that god. His additional two points, a changed life and "cumulative evidence" are additionally pointless. Lots of things change the lives of people for the better and for the worse. I know people who have been driven to madness and suicide by belief in god and people who have had their lives changed dramatically for the better by drugs, technology and all sorts of things. For many people belief in god is a powerful agent of personal change but that change need not be externally motivated. The belief itself is powerful and causes change internally. It's a "placebo effect" if you will. The cumulative evidence for the existence of god is nothing but the cumulative evidence for human belief in god is overwhelming.

Now, to attempt to circle back to my original point... This guy here demonstrates a very common belief among theists which is that atheists are simply willfully constructing a self-delusion, that they are trying to avoid the consequences of belief in god although they actually have it. I find that it is quite a common belief among theists that atheists are secretly theists but just don't want to believe. it seems impossible for some of them to grasp that perhaps there are people who WANT to believe, but can't do so without evidence. I personally cannot conceive of believing in something without evidence in your favor and yet I am not willing to be so foolish as to deny the existence of the majority of people who do.

This illustrates one of the difficulties facing atheists, however, it is not the only attitude confronting a non-theist. The other is more difficult to describe and discuss but is evident in the dialogue between William Sinkford and Rebecca Parker and in the message that came from the pulpit at the FUC church this week, and that is the assumption that theists and non-theists share the same basic concept of the mystery of life and that the language used in that discussion is inherently "god oriented".

To understand the nature of the dialogue, it helps to understand the initial statement that started the controversy. The issue under discussion was the need for a vocabulary of reverence for non-theistic humanists. Sinkford is the head of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a group consisting of lots of atheist UU members and he made the following comment:

"Our resistance to religious language, I believe, helps to account for the struggle that so many of us experience in trying to say who we are as Unitarian Universalists. I always encourage people to work on their elevator speech, what you'd say when you're going from the sixth floor to the lobby and somebody asks you, "What's a Unitarian Universalist?" You've got forty-five seconds. Here's my latest: 'The Unitarian side tells us that there is only one God, one spirit of life, one power of love. The Universalist side tells us that God is a loving God, condemning none of us, valuing the spark of divinity that is in every human being.' So my version of what Unitarian Universalism stands for is, 'One God, no one left behind'."

When the leader of a group consisting of a large number of true atheists, people like myself who simply find the entire concept of god irrational and

non-intuitive, makes a statement like this, defining the religion as "one God, no one left behind" you might be able to imagine that some of those people weren't so keen on it. In fact, people were downright furious that he used the "G" word to describe their religion. I attended a sermon by American Humanist Association president Mel Lipman in which he talked about how bothered he was by this choice of words. I then attended the sermon on Sunday in which the minister used similar language, talking about angels and God, trying to be as inclusive as possible in her choice of words, using angels as a metaphor and God as a name for something beyond the ego. This turned both Esther and I off to the message and we got to talking about it and in the process I came to a realization. When theists treat non-theists as theists who simply use a different vocabulary to talk about God, they completely deny and disrespect the situation a non-theist is in and in so doing they belittle the non-theist even as they seem to be tolerating them.

To illustrate, the minister talked about caring and about whether people felt as if they were cared by something other than other humans, something beyond themselves. She said that she spoke to others within the congregation and found that the people she spoke to all said that they had felt that caring support from outside themselves. She talked about the idea that the regardless of faith tradition, when we talk about that "thing that's beyond ego" that we're talking about the divine. She talked about how we're all seeking to discover this caring and that it helps us feel comforted in the human condition. This, however, is completely wrong where an atheist is concerned.

Somebody who does not believe there is a God or the supernatural, who has never felt the "presence" or "external caring" in their lives but who has reverence and awe for their lives and situation is emphatically not referring to the same thing that a theist is when they refer to God. A theist feels grateful for the gift of their life from God. A non-theist, on the other hand, is grateful to their parents for the part they played in it and might marvel at the odds that they exist at all and be deeply awed by the sheer unlikeliness of the whole thing, but they do not feel indebted to any external force. A theist seeks something outside of themselves, they seek to understand and venerate somebody else, a non-theist simply tries to understand how to make the most of the fortunate position they find themselves in by existing in the first place. The dilemma facing the believer in life is understanding their relationship to



god, the dilemma facing the non-believer is understanding how to make the best use of the limited time they have.

To refer to my awe and reverence for the universe, for the humbling thought of my tiny life span measured against the span of the age of the cosmos as the same thing as reverence for god completely devalues, misunderstands and disrespects what that means for me and does nothing to help me with my issues as a human being. I am in awe of my tininess next to the universe, not in awe of some fictional comparatively recent human conception of where that universe came from. I want to know how to deal with my life within the framework of what the universe is, I don't need to hear how theists place the responsibility for support and personal growth outside of themselves on some supernatural force. I have no intuitive or factual way basis for thinking such a thing exists. This places the responsibility for my life square on my shoulders and that is an entirely different situation than the situation facing a believer. God is not a synonym, our personal dilemmas are not equivalent and, this is the important bit, by defining the vocabulary the theistic side defines the issue in terms that literally make it IMPOSSIBLE to communicate what a non-theist actually believes. Contrary to the belittling statements of people who deny the existence of atheists or who think they atheists simply give a different name to god, atheists are usually people who find themselves stuck with the realization (which they didn't even want) that god simply wasn't there to be found and they were stuck with figuring it all out for themselves. This is a lonely and frightening prospect when it's first encountered and is often a shock. People in this situation, people in my situation, have challenges in life that are completely different from the challenges of the theist and part of that is the need to find answers in themselves and in the world around them.

This is not shallow, cheap or less awe-inspiring than the feelings of a theist, in fact you feel so very small and alone, not arrogant but humbled and fortunate and it's bothersome to constantly hear the terms of the discussion using a language that does not convey the ideas or challenges facing an atheist at best or that belittles an atheist as if they are simply immoral or stupid. I would rather theists just honestly admit that they differ from non-theists and stop pretending that it's just a matter of semantics rather than that they pretend it all means the same thing in the name of inclusiveness (while using language that inherently disrespects the non-theistic viewpoint).

I'm an atheist. I don't want to avoid god. If there was evidence that god existed, I'd be a theist. If there were evidence that a particular god was real, I'd believe in that one. I can't find evidence of god in general or the Bible god in particular. I just wish that believers could at least comprehend the real situation, motivation and dilemma of a non-theist and use language that allowed that situation to be mutually understood but by using theistic terminology they can not. It's extremely frustrating in general and doubly so in a group like UU that is supposed to be beyond these things.

I doubt I will return to FUC because I am not looking to religion to help me find somebody outside of humanity, I am looking to it to provide me with a connection to humanity and practical solutions to the problems of existence that don't require that I fake the belief in the supernatural. The supernatural is a crutch, a mental shortcut to prop people up in times of distress and confusion but a crutch only works if it can legitimately be leaned on. For me, that is not possible. So, being tolerant of me, the atheist, is not helping anything. I need you, the theist, to attempt to understand what it means to be in my situation and to offer, if possible, solutions or empathy based on humanity without the supernatural which is powerless in my case. If you cannot do that, we are not having a dialogue, you are simply not understanding me.

I think there needs to be, and I might try to put it together, a primer for believers that explains the different problems facing the atheist in super simple terminology that they can understand. Preferably with pictures. :-)

**lefty and righty**

**Tue, 17 May 2005 10:39:17 +0000**

The political left as noticed that a huge part of the appeal of the political right is that the right talks about god in unashamed, unequivocal terms. God exists in the minds of most people, it is the only real existence god needs to have because it provides all the reason most people need to make their decisions based on whatever they think he wants. When the left talks about god they come off as phony and contrived and it is large part because they are simply far more open and accepting of alternate theistic and humanist viewpoints and they don't take things in the literal, fundamental way that their counterparts on the right tend to. This is a problem. No Bible-thumping, god-fearing, red-blooded 'Merican worth his or her salt is gonna make room for compromise,

inclusiveness and all that vague god talk. No, they want to hear it cut and dried, black and white. They want somebody who treats a political press conference like a pulpit and who wears their love of the Lord on their sleeves. Liberal theology lacks teeth. It lacks clarity and if there is one thing that a god-fearer wants (needs) it's clarity.

The problem is related to the one in my latest screed about the challenge facing non-theists of being understood by theists. When liberal progressive deistic believers (even those of the Christian faith) use the language of god it's weak and offensive both to the "true believers" and to the non-believers. If they use the language of reason or passionate humanism they fail to connect to the spiritual parts of most people. The plain fact is that when you have been taught that being human is inherently sinful, flawed and in need of salvation it is nearly impossible to accept a message of individual strength, hope and value. Nothing about the Christian doctrine of imperfection and sin, the idea that you are fundamentally flawed from birth, is geared towards the development of a healthy functioning human being. It is the exact opposite of the message that ought to be given to children.

Shame, guilt and self-loathing are huge parts of American culture and when those emotions are chief components of a person's personality makeup they need clarity. They don't want to make judgement calls because they have been taught that their judgement is inherently faulty. They don't want to be given self-reliance, because they ultimately want to rely on god. They know, when a liberal person speaks about god, that it's not their god being spoken about. It's a vague and deistic, loving and fuzzy god. The liberal, warm, loving god lacks the clear black and white certainty of salvation and damnation. It's not the same god at all.

Last night, while talking to Esther, we were discussing the meaning of the word god and she was wondering why I referred to myself as an atheist rather than an agnostic if I believed that all living things are made of the underlying energy of the universe. I mean, isn't god a possible name for the energy that unites all living things? I agreed that there are people who consider that to be their god and to be their definition of god. For me, however, that misses the crucial point of difference between a theist and an atheist. A theist imbues that energy with intelligence, purpose and personality, I just call it the fabric of space-time, mechanistic and unaware. It's a scientific fact that matter is made

of energy and additionally that all living things on this planet are related to one another. The interconnectedness of everything, the fact that we are physically made of energy, may be amazing but it's also not supernatural. It implies no design or sentience on the part of the energy. The energy in the universe may in fact be more analogous to the electrical activity that makes up a mind than the electrical activity that occurs in a battery but I simply cannot verify that is the case and I do not believe that is true, even if I acknowledge that it's not impossible.

Esther then made a great point. She said that this was not what she thought of when she thought of the word god. She said that to her the idea didn't require some sort of belief in a cosmic person but that she considered it to be the word that people give to whatever feels most sacred and powerful to them. I agreed there, from that standpoint the number of gods on earth, real live gods, in the form of powerful things that gain the devotion of people, is immense. There are gods everywhere. Again, I would say no atheist will deny that gods, small "g", are quite prevalent. We take issue to the concept of God, big "G", the cosmic intelligence, the creator deity, the eternal father. She wrinkled her nose and said that she didn't believe in that either. I think an agnostic is undecided as to whether God exists, in the western tradition and an atheist has decided that God is non-existent.

Ultimately, what this means, is that when somebody takes the more deistic view, the progressive theological position in which the Bible is not God's Word but simply human words about god, good advice but hardly the alpha and omega, the person means something dramatically different by the word G/god than the conservative does. This is actually costing liberals and rationalists lots of problems these days because the majority of people in some parts of the country (and a sizable minority even in the most liberal of places) no longer have the attention spans for or interest in understanding the subtleties of discourse, the complexities of ideas. They face enough complexity in their daily lives without the additional burdens of having to think through cosmic existential dilemmas. They want clarity, certainty, direction, unequivocal, in order to know how to live their lives. That is why this message, the message of divine certainty, of faith based presidency and the rest of the right resonates with these people. They lack the time and willpower to make large moral decisions for themselves on the basis of considered analysis of consequences of

actions. They want it packaged, delivered, canned and scanned. It's so much easier.

That's why fast food churches and charismatic movements are having such an effect in the country these days. Big giant churches that provide simply answers to complicated questions and allow you to unburden yourself from the toil of thinking for yourself. Why decide a complex moral issue for yourself based on the circumstances and consequences when somebody else already figured it all out for you 2000 years ago? It's lazy but it's hardly surprising given the amazing complexity of finance, society, technology and all that. It's no wonder that people just want to eat their McDonald's Super-Size Meal, head to church for a little life direction and then head to Ikea for the rest of their personal organizational needs. The "culture" we are in hardly encourages the contemplative and examined life or thinking for ones-self.

People on the left, Christian or not, simply would rather use conscience and personal responsibility than laws and moral certainty. The Christian-Greek scriptures can definitely be read (in large part) as a movement towards individual conscience and away from legalistic moral certainty. The Jewish law code is not the foundation of Christianity and people who lean towards a trained conscience and an open mind could honestly be said to be closer to the personality of Jesus in the Bible, but that is not the concept of Christianity that is comforting to people these days. A Christianity based on tolerance, open-mindedness and love is too uncertain, too hippy-ish for the political right. They like the moral clarity of the Paul books and the Mosaic Law. Jesus was a liberal and a non-conformist but that doesn't matter. You cannot reclaim or recast the character of Jesus or the supposed message of the Bible with people who don't want that message to be flexible. They're looking to be absolved of personal responsibility, not to take it on.

The irony, of course, is that through inclusiveness and open-ness the left has made themselves exclusionary by accident. By defending rights rather than defending morality, liberals wind up offending those on the right who believe that morality (and their brand of it, a that) needs to be enforced and defended at the expense of individual rights. The insistence on acceptance and open-ness is, in and of itself, a flaw in the eyes of the right and therefore the right rejects the left as dangerous even as the left defends the right of conservatives to do it. As long as people are feeling overwhelmed by life, a majority will

gravitate towards conservative mindsets and as long as that is the case, the concept of god will be defined for it's moral absolutism, not it's moral relativism.

What a quandary.

So, how do the humanists, the progressive theists, the loose coalition of pagans, atheists and the like, who are united by shared humanity, shared respect and shared belief in human rights, responsibilities and power talk about their moral center? How do they project that a life of false certainty is not the solution to the need for stability? How do they share the fact that their views are not evil, not shallow, not meaningless, not immoral when the only thing that stands for morality, good, meaning and depth in the minds of the right is GOD and that word doesn't translate the same to both sides? I wish I knew...

### **Every Silver Lining Has a Cloud**

**Thu, 19 May 2005 11:18:38 +0000**

The Dalai Lama writing in his book "How to Practice" talks about the fact that many things that have an outer nature of pleasure actually have an inner nature of pain. I don't have the book here in front of me, so I may not be getting what he said correct in all it's facets, but I seem to recall him giving an example about eating. Eating a good meal has an outer nature of pleasure because it's pleasant to the senses and can cause you to feel physically sated from your hunger. The inner nature of pain becomes apparent, however, if you over-indulge in that eating. The inner nature of eating, regardless of the quantity or the quality, is an attempt to satisfy a craving. A craving is a sensation of need, a sensation of desire, a negative situation (hunger) that we desire to balance out through a positive one (eating). So, the outer nature of eating (flavor, aroma, etc) is pleasure, but it's root cause (seeking to satisfy a hunger) is pain. This is the true inner nature of the experience. People often become confused about hunger. They are not physically hungry but spiritually so but lacking spiritual guidance and training, lacking discipline and focus, they eat food instead. On the surface they may think they are enjoying themselves by eating to excess or when they aren't really hungry but by mistaking something that is ultimately of a painful nature for something that

will cause satisfaction they ultimately reap a negative consequence, namely, sickness, obesity and health problems.

The yin/yang symbol, which many people are aware of, shows light and dark as if they were two fish swimming in a circle, each holding on to the tail of the other. One thing I had never really noticed about the symbol before, and which I learned in a book a few days back, is that the dark half has a dot of light in it and the light half has a dot of dark. This is to show that it is often the case that the negative has a seed of the positive in it and vice versa. Seemingly good actions motivated by ultimately selfish motives will ultimately backfire on the person who is acting because the true nature becomes apparent with enough time. This is illustrated by the yin/yang rather well, I think.

These thoughts are on my mind this morning for a variety of reasons. First off, I saw the new Star Wars movie "Revenge of the Sith" last night. It was alright, for a badly directed and badly acted space drama, but that's not the point of this post. The movie actually stimulated my thought processes in this direction because in it the maxim "The pathway to hell is paved with good intentions" is well illustrated. The movie is about the transformation of a good person into an evil one through a series of passionately motivated actions that take a seemingly positive emotion (concern for the well-being of another) and transform it into a negative emotion (desire for power). Lucas' artistic pretensions and directorial faults aside, the concept of duality and "two sides to every coin" expressed within that story line is ultimately true and fitting to many of the things I have been contemplating recently.

I think that wisdom is quite simply the ability to find the true natures of things, to embrace and accept what things really are (both the silver lining and it's associated cloud) and learning to make principled decisions based on this knowledge, decisions that strive to truly offset the bad with the good through an accurate understanding of the inner nature of both. Any truly wise principled morality needs to function in service to this concept because it is the only consistently true thing we can observe about right and wrong. We can observe that what might appear to be right can be wrong and what might appear to be wrong can be right. We learn through experience and by listening to those who have come before us (experience passed down) how to judge the positive and negative but we often make the mistake of equating positive and

negative with right and wrong. This is the difference between exercising wisdom versus following a set of absolute "moral" dictates.

While the eating of food might make a decent example of the concept of inner and outer natures, another example is more direct and bears more clearly on the subject. That example is religious devotion. Religious devotion takes on many forms but for a large percentage of the world it has an inner nature that is profoundly negative. Why do I say this? Because many religions, if not most, are ultimately motivated by fear of the unknown, fear of death, fear of taking moral and ethical responsibility for ones own self. You are afraid to die, you are motivated to believe in another life to offset that fear. Your supposedly positive believe (heaven, eternal bliss) has an inner nature of fear. If that belief is threatened by logic, science, reason or circumstances in your life, the inner nature, the fear, becomes apparent. You are terrified of losing the paradise. What you may not fully realize, however, is that it was the fear of not having it that made you decide to believe in it in the first place.

There are many types of fear that motivate religious devotion and these forms of religious devotion tend to betray these inner fears when put to the test. This leads me to another realization which is that the inner nature of a thing always shapes the outer nature in ways both subtle and direct. Continuing on with the religion example, the feeling of inadequacy in the face of life's problems and the fear associated with failure helps motivate the belief in the need for salvation, in the state of imperfection. By believing that it isn't our fault that we make mistakes and that we've been redeemed, it allows us to feel as if we can face life's problems after all, despite everything. This feeling that we are being supported, saved, assisted, is the positive outer nature of the belief system but it's negative inner nature comes through when it is threatened and we return to the fear of being alone and overwhelmed.

Aren't there positive things that have a positive inner AND outer nature? Yes, logically there have to be, just as there are negative things with a negative inner nature. If I were to allow greed and selfishness, for instance, to lead me to kill another person and steal their possessions, that would be a case of a negative act motivated by a negative feeling. If I give my kidney to save the life of a random stranger simply because she needs it, that is a positive act with a positive inner nature. But just think how hard it is to identify events, belief systems and behaviors in our lives that are entirely positive or entirely



negative? What about the girlfriend or boyfriend or husband or wife who shows love to another person but was really motivated to enter the relationship by loneliness, fear, an inability to find direction or some other feeling of an internal void that they attempt to fill with another person? What about the parents who decide to have children because they are bored, unfulfilled or afraid to grow old without carrying on their name? Love is often motivated by fear, our real motives as people are rarely directly visible in our actions.

It doesn't mean, of course, that our real motives are entirely hidden. The longer and deeper the exposure to a thing, the more clearly it's inner nature is exposed. The relationship motivated out of loneliness will break up or lose it's positivity, the religion built on fear will cause it's followers to proclaim love but not show it when dogma is at stake. The alcohol that makes you feel better for a while, makes you sick. The food that makes you feel better will make you fat. Maybe this is why we like dogs so much as a species. Their inner nature seems to be good and their outer nature matches it. It's tough not to feel comforted by that when the human mind is so conflicted.

I've been worked so hard of late to understand my own motives and to identify when the things I am doing in my life (even those that appear positive) are motivated by negativity. It's surprising to me how difficult it is but it is much easier than it used to be. If I had to sum up my transformation that I have experienced over the last year it's that I've become more aware of why I do the things I do and braver about changing my actions and situations and beliefs when I find that they have an inner nature that is negative. One major result of that change recently is the alteration of my living situation with Esther. It started as a reaction to a blind panic that came on me but over the course of a few days of self-analysis I came to realize that my motives in living with her, in being in the relationship in the way I currently was, were not positive but rather negative. I was attempting to introduce stability in my life because I felt unstable, attempting to introduce self-discipline by including another. This negative feeling, the feeling of being out of control, the feeling of being unequipped to deal with life and the world, was a big part of the Amanda decision and is a natural reaction for me. Now that I understand it, however, I am (I hope) in a better position to do something about it. Esther is moving out and I am going to figure out how to discover and use my positive motivations for my self-development and awareness. I am going to figure out the inner

natures of the things in my life and I am going to discipline my mind and my body to allow me to take mastery of my own balance. Once I have been able to accomplish this I will hopefully be able to make relationship, religion and other decisions in such a way that I will not have love motivated by fear, will not have the "positive" motivated by the negative.

This is the first time in my life that I have understood and been able to frame the issues in this way. The dualistic right / wrong, good / evil simplicity of my upbringing, the "truth" / "worldly" clarity, is gone but in its place is a much more realistic understanding of the way things actually are (as opposed to the way moralists would like them to be). This understanding, which I grant is so recent that I'm still sort of holding it up to the light and examining it, may for the first time provide me with the ability to answer the all-important second question about morality. In my mind, the first question of morality is "What should I do in my life?" and the answer is ridiculously simple. "The the most good you can for yourself and everyone else." What more is there to morality? The second question, however, is infinitely complex. "How can I do what I should do?" I may know that I shouldn't hurt the feelings of the people around me, I know that I shouldn't break somebody's heart, but the question is "how do I make sure that my choices and actions lead to the moral results I desire?" and no list of "do this, don't do that" can answer the question of "how". How is a question about our insides, our motivations, our inner natures. How is a question about self-understanding and self-awareness and (most of all) self-discipline. I mean discipline in the sense of "training" here, since the beating up of ourselves is a negative, not a positive activity. It's inner nature is negative as well because it comes from fear of failure. A negative motivated by a negative is not good.

So, self-flagellation (physical or mental) is not a positive answer to "how". Paul's "I pummel my body and lead it as a slave" is not good advice. But, having an understanding of one's own emotions, one's own motivations, having a realistic and unflinching view of ones own self gives a viewpoint that might allow one to make decisions that seem counter-intuitive or wrong but work out for the best in the long run. Understanding that the inner natures of things manifest themselves eventually can help in making decisions that are not only beneficial in the short term but also in the long.

One final thing that I have come to realize is that a positive thing motivated by a negative is not necessarily a bad thing just as a negative motivated by a positive is not necessarily a good one. Motivations and inner natures are just (for want of a better term) realities that need to be understood and taken into account. They are not judgmental. They are just ways of attempting to learn to exercise the most wisdom available to us. I may have had negative inner natures to some positive things I have done in the past but their results in terms of good done to others are the standard by which "good" and "bad" can be applied to my actions. Good and bad are about the consequences, yin and yang or inner and outer natures are more about behaviors themselves.

The language for talking about things like this makes my head hurt. I feel that as a civilization, human beings have not really figured out how to get a good grasp on the subtleties of meaning necessary to talk about the human experience. It's just too complicated, just too vague. I do know, however, that when think about my life these days, the words, the terms and the ideas I use (and many of those I have heard over the years) are starting to make a whole new kind of sense. My moral upbringing told me the what but lacked the language to discuss the "how" with any level of precision or subtlety. Now I am discovering that language and learning to apply it to myself. I think that's great. Maybe there is some hope for me yet. :-)

**Wed, 01 Jun 2005 13:23:00 +0000**

chain of causation:

The causal connection between an original cause and its subsequent effects

"Chain of causation" is a legal phrase and refers to the fact that an effect can be traced back to a cause in a chain of causes and effects but that the original cause of a series of events is still connected to it's subsequent effects.

I think about these chains a lot. The present is always the result of a chain of causation from the past in personal life, professional life, etc. You can't escape chains of causation.

Tracing events back to their root causes never really works because every thing can go all the way back to the beginning of the universe, ultimately. It's like

when a kid keeps asking you "why". There is always an earlier cause for any given effect. There are those who use this idea to speculate that the first cause of the universe was God, but then there is simply the question of "what was the cause of God"? At some point we simply have to say, "we don't know what came before that" and be OK with it. I say that I don't know what caused the universe and never will. I don't believe it's God but I don't know that it isn't either. I just say "that's now knowable".

Chains of causation are quite fascinating when they involve things that are knowable in that there is rarely a single cause for any given effect and you can examine all sorts of alternate paths or pick one. Now, I'm going to select a link in the distant past of a chain and trace it forward, just to see where it gets me.

At some point in the distant past, some bedouin shepherds built some small settlements. The cause? Likely the need to do commerce with the people in the nearby cities.

Soon some sort of socio-economic collapse took place in the cities. The cause? Invasions by other tribes of people from the sea. The hill dwelling people banded together more tightly and developed closer knit communities in response to this external threat.

As time went by, these initial small settlements grew and the people developed a stronger sense of identity of being separate from the city people and especially from the sea people. These encampments became cities, or at least towns of a sort.

The new generations, growing up in these places, had no knowledge of their past other than what they were told. They were told stories by parents and grandparents, which were stories that had been told going back generations, expounded upon, updated, altered and added to. They learned about bedouin leaders from back in the pre-settlement days. They heard myths and legends about giants and gods and heroes, and they grew up and passed the stories on in their own ways.

Over the course of generations, a national identity formed. This took place so long ago that everywhere there were 10,000 or more people it was a major city and in every major city was a king. These cities, smaller than modern suburbs,

considered themselves nations and warred with one another. Thanks to the initial settlement choice, within a few hundred years the descendants of the bedouin shepherds were city folks themselves, with only an ancestral memory of being wandering shepherds. A few cities, a chosen leader, an oral tradition of stories and a few enemies to contend with gave this group of people a national identity.

Like any good nation, they had finance, politics and religion and their politics and finance were (of necessity) interoperable with their neighbors but their religion was (of necessity) local. The bedouin ancestors of these people had learned, from previous generations oral teachings, that there was a supreme god and a pantheon of lesser gods. The supreme god didn't get involved in human affairs, but had given his 70 sons each a chosen nation, a chosen people. They understood themselves to be the inheritance of their patron god. The cause of this belief system, of course, dates much further back in the chain of causality, over 2,000 years earlier (at the very least), along with the writing system they used and language they spoke.

Over time, as they traded, made war, grew old, told stories, wrote, thought, worshipped and worked, they developed unique views about things. They got ideas from surrounding cultures when people moved in or talked over wine while doing business, when families ate meals and the like.

Because communication and travel were difficult, each region was partially self-sufficient. They all developed localized identities and local twists on the common stories. This state of affairs, a group of affiliated tribal cities and regions who shared a common set of stories, which were echoes of earlier myths and legends, who had their own national identity and religious customs, was the natural effect of the settling of the bedouin shepherds and the collapse of the surrounding cultures.

A second big event then took place. The northern tribes were themselves invaded and they fell to the invaders. Refugees fled south, to the other cities with whom they had an ancestral history and suddenly there was a crisis. The crisis was that the disparate groups of people shared enough in common to recognize each other as kin, but not enough to be without arguments as to customs, history and the like. The response to the crisis was obvious. Synthesis. Find the common elements and emphasize them. Create out of the

multiple cultural identities, one, so that peace was possible within the cities and they could defend themselves against the outside people.

A national story was put together, taking the different stories of the groups and combining them, emphasising the common elements and shared traditions. They celebrated and glorified their heroic past and it gave them strength and hope in their troubled present. The past had taken place long long ago, so long ago that nobody knew of anybody who had ever known anybody connected to it, but they remembered stories and they wrote them down. They took existing books and combed through them, looking for stories and ideas to unite the people. There weren't many people involved in this. A few tens of thousands. The population of the Twin Cities metro area is probably larger. When the national story was compiled, people recognized it. It contained stories they already knew, characters they had heard of. Some of the details varied, but that was inevitable. It was successful.

The effect of this national story, to the melding of religious traditions and ideas, was what was hoped for. Everybody got along. The national identity was strengthened. As the new nation grew over the next few centuries, it faced new challenges and fell under foreign rulers at times. The story was even more vital. It also grew, was expounded on. Details were filled in, it was fluid. It was a very important set of stories, but not set in stone. Not at first. When the crisis passed, the subsequent people in general adapted and changed but didn't keep the story up. The story came to be regarded as holy by the priests and people who didn't like the fluid change of the current world and longed for a return to the past when things were "better".

Then a third dramatic cause happened. The remaining kingdom was itself conquered and it's people were made subjects of a foreign country. Suddenly the story was longed for by many more people but it was not available to them as it once had been. They clung to their national identity, the young growing up being particularly likely to "go native" and the older ones remembering the "good old days". They invented stories and interpretations of stories that tried to put a good spin on what was happening. After a few decades they were freed from the foreign rulers and eventually had a king who decided to bring back the good old days. He started ruling as a little boy and was smart enough and shrewd enough to recognize the power that the story held for his grandparents and parents and the priests and ministers. So, he brought it back

out, ready for a new generation, new and improved. He had new material written that would provide support for his plans but tied it in with the old material and he embarked on them with all his energy until his untimely death.

By this point the story had undergone many changes, incorporating old ideas, new ideas, political necessities and intrigues. It was multi-layered, rich, complex and important to these people. They thought of themselves in terms of their story and it's accompanying literature, as most cultures ultimately do.

The good old days never returned, for the bedouin people, however. They were not militant enough. The pen lost to the sword and over the next several centuries they splintered, scattered and spread out. They kept their sense of who they were where ever they went. They kept their story since it was all they could keep.

In effect of this larger cause of an arguably failed attempt at nation building, there was now an interesting situation. A nation of people with no nation of land. Technically the people were genetically related to all the other groups in their vicinity, but their cultural differences were such that nobody would have them in and they wouldn't mix with them. The one constant was the story and the biggest constant in the story was their patron god and the ideas they had developed about him did not lend themselves to co-mingling with the rest of the world. Quite the opposite. The ideas were specifically designed to identify them as separate from the rest.

These small groups spread in unpredictable ways, following money, food and prosperity wherever it took them. They had further generations who knew only the story and seperateness but who grew up in yet another culture. More ideas crept in and then, at some point a new set of beliefs sprouted off of the initial set, taking them in a new direction and ultimately taking their national story out of their ethnic group and into the larger world where it rapidly changed form as new people (who did not have bedouin ancestors) took the story and reconceived it for themselves. This process was so popular that a new religion sprung up around it and eventually the old problem of a divided kingdom was faced again, this time by a king in a different kingdom. The problem, it seemed, was that there were tons of variations of beliefs related to this new religion that had sprung up. People were arguing about it. The king

wanted peace. So, pragmatic guy that he was, he made them all work out a set of compromises, called it the state religion and solved that dilemma.

As we've seen so far in the story, solving that dilemma was just another cause for a bunch of new effects. The new religion outlasted his kingdom, splintered, grew, changed, morphed and developed it's own body of writing and literature and story all while the poor original group of bedouin descendants clung to their old story and looked for somewhere to sleep.

The new religion, a fresh set of ideas, started to conquer lands, peoples and places. Old schools of thought were replaced, new power structures built. It spread all over the world like a fungus. After over a thousand years of this, a major split happened and it started all over again, spreading on to new continents as they were conquered.

While this massive chain of causality, engulfing much of the planet, was busy springing forth from the actions of a few bedouin shepherds who just wanted to settle down and sell sheep, the rest of the world was blissfully unaware of it. Similar stories of cause and effect had been taking place all over the world for 4.55 billion years and in human culture for over 100,000 years. This was a butterfly creating a typhoon, completely unintentionally, one little thing feeding into the next over the course of generations and centuries. Nobody outside this chain knew it was there until it spread into their cultures, until it was already so huge that nobody knew what had started it all. It was assumed, as logically it would be, that whatever started it must have been HUGE and the story certainly seemed to back up that assumption. This just made it grow faster.

Another cause, a major event, then took place, quite outside this religious chain of causality. In a part of the earth where people were generally wealthy and free to play around with things, a new "renaissance" took place in which the knowledge that had been displaced by the religion was rediscovered and was found to be pretty useful. This knowledge led to a systematic study of how the world worked and discoveries and inventions and technology like the printing press and microscope, the hot air balloon and the like. This led to a massive series of effects as science built on top of science and technology on technology and spread around the world, making communication easier, travel easier, lives longer and the world a very different place.



The effects of this renaissance were dramatic and costly to the believers of the story because the story itself was finally investigated and discovered to be what it had been all along. Science developed the tools to unearth the past and the chain was traced backwards until it arrived back where it started, on a patch of land in the middle east among some shepherds. The story was discovered to be a national myth, a tribal story, a casting of an ancient god into a new setting, a defense against outsiders and the story of a people. Science learned all these things. Science discovered how old the earth was, where languages came from, where cultures developed, where ideas were born. Science offered no alternative story, just a representation that said, "this is what actually happened". This too was a cause.

The effect was pain and hurt and disbelief by believers of the story. Sticking to the story no matter what. It was a type of blind credulity that the people who wrote the story in the first place probably would have not approved of. The effect of this was a response against the science, the development of lies and rhetoric to attempt to protect the story, to protect the idea.

This is why creationism exists. This is why fundamentalism exists. They are effects of a long long chain of causality. Christianity exists through accident, chance, selection, politics, motives both good and pure. Judaism exists for far simpler reasons, culture, family, identity. The Bible is the end product of this unfolding of events. The chain of causality is now known. The story does not tell about what happened, not literally, but it does reflect what happened in terms of reflecting what the people who wrote it thought about and how they thought about it. It documents, in it's own pages, the process of transformation the Canaanite god YHWH went through. His combination with his "father" El and his gradual promotion from "lower god" in the Canaanite pantheon to "Soveriegn Lord of the Universe".

There is a lot to learn from the Bible, from this chain, but people who take the story as the whole point of the process, as literal, are missing out on what the real lessons are. People who blindly worship the book or the god in it, are missing out their lives. Not understanding the chain of causality that lead to the acceptance of this idea, this story, means that you don't understand the story or the world you live in. For me, the understanding of the story about

the story gives it meaning, deep meaning, but it's a human meaning and I'm OK with that. I'm a human and so are you.



# **Part 4:**

# **Landed**



Heading into the summer months of 2005, it felt like I was really getting my bearings. Esther and Syd and I were doing a lot of camping at Frontenac State Park, I was studying Buddhism, attending FUS, and even my torrid pace of reading had started to calm a bit as I began to feel that I had a general idea of where both my old and new beliefs had come from.

My relationships outside the Watchtower Society were developing. Esther and I had been together for nine months and things were going well. The previous 14 months had contained more change and drama than I had every thought I could possibly endure but I could see the rough outlines of a new life and a new self beginning to take shape and I foresaw myself eventually coming into my own as a healthy, well-adjusted person.

I didn't discuss it in my blog (tending not to blog at all during particularly difficult times) but I had been through a few other difficulties above and beyond grappling with my newfound atheism and pariah status. A friend of mine, a young man named Arn who was a Witness, had died of cancer in late 2004. I wanted to attend his funeral but chose not to because of the fear of upsetting the other mourners by my presence. I took the day off of work and privately held my own remembrance. Shortly after I wrote my letter of disassociation my father came to my house to tell me formally that he would not be having contact with me except to see my son and to make sure I was still alive. He said he looked forward to welcoming me back, the prodigal son, with a feast of vegetables (he knew I was a vegetarian at the time).

Three days later, his brother, my Uncle Rob, died in an accident at work.

When Rob died, I went straight to my father's house, despite his visit, to offer my condolences. I wasn't as close to Rob as I would have liked to have been, but I did love him and he was my dad's closest brother. Rob and my father were the same distance in age from one another that I and Rhett were, 14 months. If my dad were Rhett, Rob would have been me.

Rob was not a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and neither were any of my dad's extended family so I was as welcome at the funeral and at my grandmother's home as I always had been, despite my apostate condition. The funeral was, as funerals generally are, stressful, tragic, and painful. Esther stood by me throughout.

As has already been mentioned in earlier entries, my grandmother on my mom's side of the family died shortly after Rob. It was a time of funerals. Once again the extended family consisted of mainly Catholics, my mothers brother Pete and his family being the only Witnesses in the group since my mom had been disfellowshipped. Once again I was involved in the funeral as would normally be natural. I was a pallbearer, even.

By June I was beginning to feel that my new support structures, new friendships, new coping mechanisms, new social constructs, were being tested. I was tired, depressed, angry, confused. Esther had a lot of patience with me. As an escape, a bit of a change of scenery, she suggested we take a road trip to New York. She had lived in Brooklyn for 5 years, still had a good friend out there (her ex-boyfriend John), and wanted to show me all of her favorite places. I thought it sounded like just the thing. We planned our trip for the 4th of July weekend.

The trip to New York was a marvelous time. We saw the sights, ate great food, visited great book stores, and enjoyed each other's company. We even visited

the Watchtower Headquarters in Brooklyn, a very strange visit for me. On the ride home I was relaxed, giddy almost, having seen the Big Apple for the first time, taken a lot of great photos and shaken off some of the stress and discomfort of the previous months.

I had neglected to pack my charger for my cellular phone while we were on the trip and by the return leg my phone was dead. No matter, I thought, I'll just charge it when I get home. Arriving in Minnesota late on the evening of the 4th of July, Esther and I were so tired that we crashed in bed at her apartment. I woke up early the next morning to drive to my apartment, shower, shave, dress for work and check on my cats. Upon arrival I noticed that my phone had some messages, to be expected, and I decided to call into my voicemail from the office so I wouldn't be late. It was then that the phone rang and on the caller ID I spied Esther's name. I answered, lightly asking what was up, figuring that perhaps I had forgotten something at her place or maybe that she just wanted to say she loved me.

"Sweetie," she said, barely in control of her voice, "I don't know how to tell you this. Rhett died."

I don't know what else she said.

**Rhett Sutter: July 27, 1972 - July 4, 2005**

**Wed, 06 Jul 2005 05:29:01 +0000**

Monday morning my brother Rhett died, he was 32.

I don't have words to describe how I am feeling right now. He was my first and best friend and the greatest big brother a guy could ever want. I loved him more than I can ever describe and looked up to him from the time I was born. I can't imagine a world without Rhett, but I will have to live in it.

I do not know what I am going to do.

I got off the phone with Esther and smashed it on the floor of my kitchen. I got dizzy and sick and collapsed into a convulsing, sobbing, heap on the floor of my dining room. The room was spinning, my head was about to burst, my lungs were hot, and all I could think was "no no no no no no no no no no, not Rhett, not Rhett, not Rhett". I needed my dad. I needed my mom. I needed my home, my family, my friends, my brother Reed and sister Robbie. I couldn't stay in my apartment but I didn't know if I could walk, even crawl.

There was a Sharpie marker and a scrap of paper on the floor within reach of me. I don't know why they were there. In retrospect it seems strange. I scribbled something about going to my dad's house and I guess I must have stuck it in the door for Esther to find. My dad's house was filled with mourners and cards and flowers, people were out in the yard, in the house, everywhere. People had congregated there since the day previously when the event had happened. When my brother died.

I staggered in, sobbing and broken. I don't remember what happened exactly. I was hugged, I somehow grasped that Rhett had died from blood clots that had formed in his leg after he fractured a small bone in his foot. He had died around three in the morning on Monday, just as I was wrapping up my time in New York, feeling so much better about things. The family had been in a panic trying to contact me. They didn't know where I was, couldn't get me on my cell or home phone. I raged and sobbed and my father held me while trying to absorb what was happening.

After an hour or two, the initial storm calmed. I was wrung dry, exhausted, completely spent. I couldn't help but notice how most of the other mourners steered clear of me. Very few said a word to me. Every person there knew that nobody had been closer to Rhett than I, that we had been practically inseparable our whole lives, that he was Bert and I was Ernie, that along with his wife and our father and mother that I would feel Rhett's loss more deeply than anyone because I was a part of him and he was a part of me, like two very different sides of the same coin. The legendary Lavone, Cain and Abel (why is it always Abel who has to die?).

I heard that my mother had been there the previous day. I called her to ask her to come again. I also called Chad Leighton and Jennifer O'Leary, who knew and loved my brother but, as non-Witnesses, would not have been informed of his death. Normally I would never think to invite worldly people or disfellowshipped people over to my dad's home but if there was one situation in which human decency and love should take precedence over religious divisions it was then and there. My dad said it was OK. He knew I needed support and the rest of the visitors were avoiding me. I promised to keep my friends in the yard, even though we had grown up in that very house, Chad and I, watched over by my mother. Jennifer too, had grown up in that house, attending the daycare program that my mom ran until she was in 6th grade.

Unfortunately, my hopes of having a few old friends and my mom around in the first few hours after learning of my brother's death so that I wouldn't feel completely alone and isolated were more than my step-mother could handle. She didn't want worldly or disfellowshipped or disassociated people on her property, in her house or anywhere near her regardless of whose mother, brother or childhood friend they were.

She made this clear to me when she asked to speak to me for a moment and took me aside into the back yard.

My dad's wife, Diana, and I did not know each other particularly well but I had always tried to be welcoming to her despite the difficulty of doing so. When she had married my father (her third husband and the first one who wasn't a pony-tailed slimeball) she brought with her three daughters with different fathers, a rough pool-hall past, and a mid-life conversion to The Truth. He was a find for her. A nice guy in good health and an Elder to boot. She was an anxious, nervous person who didn't tolerate people well so she immediately started changing the Sutter family home to suit her. This involved an end to the open-door policy of visitors and friends coming and going. The Nuclear Gopher studio in the basement, which had functioned as a practice and recording space for over 20 years for Rhett, Reed, Robbie, myself and countless friends, was closed down, cleaned out, and painted over by Diana so she could have somewhere to put her treadmill. A house that had rung with music and laughter for decades became a far more dour and negative place. The house lost it's sense of joy.



Even as I stood downstairs that day in what had been the Nuclear Gopher, what had been my childhood bedroom, where Rhett and I had recorded 17 albums, told a million stories, and had grown up together, looked around at the stark white walls, the empty space where the drums and keyboards and guitars and mixer and computer desk had been, stared at Diana's silly treadmill, and tried to reconnect, ever so briefly, with what was all gone forever now (Rhett, my childhood home, Nuclear Gopher, The Truth, my sense of self), I never would have anticipated that Diana would say what she said when she brought me aside to chat a few minutes later. Never in a million years.

We sat at the table in the back yard and with a very serious look on her face she asked, "Don't you think it would be more dignified if you had a separate gathering at your own apartment?"

Dignified. Didn't I think that kicking me out of the home I was raised in a few hours after learning of my brother's death so that some people who weren't going to talk to me anyway would feel better about their religious beliefs would be more "dignified"? No. No I didn't.

I stared at her in horror. The last thing on earth I wanted was trouble, an argument. I just wanted to pretend for a minute that there was some shred of a family left to me, that my inability to believe their religion was less important than our shared loss, our shared love of the kindest, gentlest, most wonderful member of our family. And I was being asked to leave.

"I don't... what? I mean... No, um, no, Diana, I really need to be here, where I grew up, where Rhett and I shared our room, I need my mom, I need my dad, I need my family... I mean, it's not like we're going to be talking religion to people, it's not like I'm going to assault people about their religious beliefs. I know what you believe and I respect that this is your home now too and I promise I won't cause any problems, won't bother anybody, won't discuss anything that will cause any trouble.", I said, having a hard time holding myself together. I felt like I was drowning and she was trying to take my life jacket away and hold me under.

Immediately after I said that I wouldn't attack anybody's beliefs or talk about religion and that I just needed to be there because I just lost my brother, Diana said, "You know, there was a scientist who proved that Creation was true and Evolution was false and you just don't want to believe him."

"What? Who? What are you talking about? What scientist? I haven't heard anything about any scientist... I sincerely doubt that you've got that right. If you want to show me what you are talking about..." I was muddled, in shock, confused, and completely caught off guard by the sudden switch to a creation/evolution debate on her part. Part of me wanted to formulate a response, to debate this horrible woman who was attacking me from out of the blue while I was doing all I could do to simply not curl up sobbing in a fetal position but the rest of me was just in shock at the audacity, the inhumanity, the immorality, the sheer evil of what she was doing. What kind of kind, loving, supposedly Christian person tries to start a fight with somebody and throw them out of their home hours after they learn of their brother's death? I couldn't understand how anybody could be so cold, so calloused, so inhumane, so unloving.

After I stuttered my brief response to her broadside she grew louder and said, "See? I knew you would argue!"

It was entrapment. I was furious. "How can you yell at me when it was you that brought it up right after I said I wouldn't?"

"You just don't want to believe, you just don't want to follow Jehovah. You only listen to the people you agree with. If you had prayed to Jehovah..."

"I did pray Diana. You don't know anything about me or what I've been through. I cried and prayed and begged Jehovah to show me some way that it was all true..."

"Well then something is wrong with you that was blocking your prayers. You have a bad heart and it cut off the holy spirit and kept Jehovah from listening to your prayers. You just want to do what Satan wants, you just want to listen to anybody who gives you a way out from serving Jehovah."

I couldn't take it anymore. I had been through some difficult and insulting things in my life, but to be told that I was so evil, of such corrupt heart, that my very prayers were ignored by the same God that listened to this horrific shrew, that I was so selfish that I ignored all the scientists that proved creation true, that, in short, I was so evil I didn't belong in my own home, well... it was too much.

"If you don't want me here, fine, I'll leave." I stood and stormed back into the kitchen. But that wasn't enough for her, no, she followed me, yelling at me the whole way, telling me what a rotten person I was, how bad my heart was, how selfish and corrupt I was. I wanted to run out in the street in front of a truck. I wanted strangle her to death with my bare hands. I wanted to leave that horrible person who had infested the home of my childhood, wiped out everything we had left behind, and was now trying her best to insult and badger me into leaving my family home at the one moment when I was at my most fragile, my most vulnerable, my most pained.

I got as far as the front step, tears welling up, practically running away, and then I saw my mom's car pull up across the street.

I was not willing to leave now that my mom had arrived. I had asked her to come and she was here. We were both outcasts but at least now we had each other. I didn't know what to do about the Diana situation. She had gone back in the house, satisfied that she had driven the evil away. I thought about it, took a deep breath, went back inside and apologized to her for "losing my temper" and then thanked her "for her hospitality" and promised to stay out of everybody's way. My dad was there and he seemed to want peace and she didn't attack me any further.

The last time I had seen my brother had been the month previous when Esther and I had accidentally run into him at a local Walmart where he was manning a booth selling cell phones. He had been his usual warm, amazing, self and was already in a conversation with our step-sister Angie and her husband Rodney as Es and I walked up. He was honestly genuinely happy to see me, giving me a big hug and then giving Esther one as well. Despite having only met her a couple of time before this and despite her status as a "worldly" person, Rhett turned to Angie and Rodney and said, "This her girl is the best one Ryan has ever gone out with. She's great, I love her. Ryan, you gotta keep this one."

Unlike whenever I ran into my dad or Reed or Robbie, Rhett was always warm, kind, understanding and loving. The rest of the family was always sad,

awkward, or oddly restrained. Now, knowing he was gone forever, not believing in a paradise either in heaven or on earth, I wanted to see him one last time. I told everybody I would be back shortly and went to the hospital in the hopes of seeing his body. When I arrived I was informed that he was not there any longer, that his body was undergoing an autopsy.

I don't remember anything about the rest of the day, or the next day, or the day after that. I took the week off work. I suppose I ate and slept. I really don't know. I can't recall a single moment of my life from that week other than what I've said so far. I know I made a tribute video to Rhett to be shown at his funeral. I don't remember making it but I know I did. I scanned in pictures and captured video and edited the whole thing together. I had been told that Chad Astleford's brother Ryan was going to bring a video projector and was planning to make a video tribute. I felt that I should be the one to do it instead so I did but I have no recollection of actually doing it.

The funeral was the following Monday and was held at a Kingdom Hall that had two separate auditoriums that could be connected to make one mega-auditorium. It was full. There had to have been nearly 2,000 people there. I sat in the front with family, as did my mom, but just as at my father's house the week before we were both neatly ignored by the vast majority in attendance who swarmed my father, brother, sister, and Diana with cards, flowers and condolences. I received a single card and flowers in sympathy when my brother died, from Esther's brother Clint and his wife. Not a single card was forthcoming from the other 2,000 people who came to mourn him and overfilled my dad's house with cards and flowers despite my having known many of them my entire life.

The funeral talk was short on Rhett, long on Jehovah's Witness religion. The speaker said what a great person Rhett had been, how he was funny and loving and loved music, how he left behind a young son, Ian, and a lovely wife Anna as well as brothers Ryan and Reed, parents Kevin and Diana and Yvonne, sister's Roberta and Jasmine, and then he began to talk about the paradise, about how Rhett had devoted his life to Jehovah, how he would be seen again in the New Order. There were no eulogies. It was a Watchtower funeral, a tragic death used as a commercial for their theology.

After the service we all adjourned to a second location, some sort of community center or something. I had my tribute video in hand on a DVD. I had made sure not to give any clue in the video that I had made it, for fear that people would be upset at the work of an apostate being shown at a Witness funeral. I saw Ryan Astleford standing near the video projector. I had known Ryan for 15 years, played music with both he and his brother and had even been married to his wife's sister (he was married to Tabithah's sister Tawny). I said hello and handed him the video. Without a word, without returning my greeting, without offering any sort of condolence, he took it from me and turned his back on me.

Less than half a dozen Witnesses at the funeral spoke to me. Non-Witness family members were supportive, but beyond that the shunning was not lifted, not even for such a moment as this. The very few who did speak to me were probably not even aware that I was no longer a Witness. I know this to be the case with at least two people based on how they said "won't it be wonderful to get to see him in the paradise again?".

When situations arose in which speaking to me seemed necessary, they were avoided or quickly dispensed with. My old friend James, the one who had

started me on this road with his link to the web page disproving a global flood hugged me, said he was sorry, and quickly disengaged. Ryan Astleford's mother, Betty, found herself face to face with Esther and I near the end of the event and, avoiding so much as a glance at me, addressed Esther asking, "Do you think Ryan might be interested in bringing home any of the leftovers?"

At the very end, as I was preparing to leave after learning first hand what it felt like to be abandoned, shunned and psychologically abused by nearly every single person I had ever known in my entire life simultaneously, Rhett's wife Anna pulled me aside to talk to me. Tears in her eyes she told me that when she was in Pioneer School she had learned that the word of God is alive and exerts power. She begged me to open my heart, to read the Bible in a spirit of open-hearted searching for Jehovah, to allow the scriptures to change me, to reach me. She seemed so desperate for me, so sad, so honestly desirous of my salvation, so unlike the judgmental and awful Diana, that I cried and told her I would never stop searching and seeking, that I loved her, that I wished I could help her out in any way and that she would always be my sister. I understood, completely, why my brother loved and married her. She was as good a woman as he had been a man.

And then it was over. My non-Witness family promised support for me that never materialized. The Witnesses continued their outpouring of sympathy to everybody in my family except me. Esther, Sydney and I soldiered on alone. The message from my old family, my old community, was clear. Even if your family members die, we won't let up. We will treat you like a ghost. We will consider you as dead as he is. There are no extenuating circumstances. This is what the Society says and what is love, what is loyalty, what is family, except what the Society says it is?

It didn't take long for me to realize that indignation over my treatment and anger over my predicament were easier emotions to deal with than the crushing, crippling, grief I was feeling. I spent my days laying in bed, hoping that the next time I went to sleep I wouldn't wake up and when the anger built up, I wrote on my blog. It seemed that all the persecution was directed toward the aim of bullying me back into the Society against my own conscience and against what I knew to be true. So, this was the first topic when I blogged again, 8 days after Rhett's funeral.

### **I Will Rejoin Jehovah's Witnesses If...**

**Tue, 19 Jul 2005 12:09:00 +0000**

People want me to rejoin the Witnesses. My family wants it, my friends want it. I won't because I do not believe it is true and I refuse to live a lie. What to do?

Rather than talk about all the things I disbelieve about Jehovah's Witnesses and their claims, I will provide a brief and to the point list of tasks, which if accomplished by any Jehovah's Witness on earth, will bring me back to the organization. They are:

1. Provide irrefutable proof of the existence of Jehovah God. It is not sufficient to prove the possibility of the existence of a general "god" as I admit to the theoretical possibility of the existence of god. You must specifically demonstrate that this is the one true God, different from the others.
2. Provide irrefutable proof of the divine authorship of the entire Bible.
3. Provide irrefutable proof that evolution did not and does not take place and cannot account for the diversity of life.
4. Provide irrefutable proof that creation (specifically by Jehovah God and specifically as described in Genesis) did take place.
5. Provide irrefutable proof that Jesus existed and founded the religion known as Christianity.
6. Provide irrefutable proof that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is Jehovah God's mouthpiece on earth.
7. Provide irrefutable proof that a global flood wiped out nearly all of the life on this planet around 2370 BCE.

All proofs that can be logically refuted are not by definition proofs as they leave open the possibility of their being incorrect. No logical fallacies are allowed. No proof that could just as equally apply to other gods is valid, is it is specifically the claims of Jehovah's Witnesses being tested. No misrepresentation of quotations is allowed. No selective use of evidence is allowed. If confirming evidence is available from a field of knowledge, disconfirming evidence from the same field must be given equal treatment if present.

There. No attacks on Watchtower publications, just the basic things. If you want to persecute me for failing to believe your religion is true, simply prove your religion is true and I'll rejoin. If your religion is not provably true, than I cannot logically be judged for failing to believe in it exactly as I fail to believe in Shinto, Hindu, Mormonism, Norse Mythology, Neo-Paganism, Babylonian Mythology or any of the other world religions that I do not subscribe to. The

standards I hold forth as exactly the standards I would hold forth for judging a mathematical proof or a historical theory. Honest reasoning only, no fallacies.

**Anonymous**

**2005-07-19 14:32:00**

No one can do this for you. You want someone to supply faith without having to use faith. That in itself is not logical. (Hebrews 11:1)

You insist on looking at the bible from a physical standpoint, when you know that is not the way it works.

(1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

The only one who can help you is Jehovah. (2 Corinthians 3:16,17)

Remember that the Pharisees demanded proof that Jesus was the promised messiah, but he refused because of thier [sic] heart condition.

Ryan - we do not want you to come back to the organization. We want you to come back to Jehovah.

**tasty**

**2005-07-19 14:56:00**

How is this a valid response?

All religions function on faith. Faith is the universal factor. If I looked at the Book of Mormon from a "spiritual" standpoint, I'd be a Mormon. If I looked upon the Vedas that way I would be a Hindu. Every sufficiently devout person of every single religion and denomination uses faith.

What is the differentiating factor?

How can you base a religious belief on faith, just like everybody else, and then claim you're right and they're wrong? By what right is your faith more valid than their faith without some sort of evidence?

If faith is all there is to it, how does Jehovah differ from Bigfoot, Shiva, Ba'al, Enlil, Mot, Allah or The Loch Ness monster? I'm dead serious. I lost my life and family because I won't condemn other beliefs as "false religion" and state that my group is "true religion" without evidence. I am not so arrogant as to think I can just "know" in my heart that I'm right and everybody else is wrong when they too use faith.

If faith is all you have to offer, you are no different than Catholics, Mormons, Shinto, Paganism or any other belief system. Also, if it is all you have to offer, you have absolutely no right to condemn anybody else anywhere for their beliefs because their basis is as firm as yours.

So, no, I'm not asking for anything other than the evidence to back up the claim that this is the one true religion. Anything that is true should be able

to be shown to be so, but all things can shown to be true if one operates by faith.

**Anonymous**

**2005-07-19 17:35:00**

Faith is not the factor when you are differentiating from one religion [sic] to another, that is a completely different issue.

In this case though, you are challenging the fundamental beliefs of every religion [sic].

Is there a God? Every religion [sic] will say yes, but what makes Jehovah more believable than the rest - that is where the evidence comes in. However, to see the evidence you have to first accept, on faith, that there is in fact a God.

**tasty**

**2005-07-19 17:49:00**

I am, in fact, challenging the fundamental beliefs of every religion but maybe not in the way you mean.

First off, it is not true that all religions will answer yes to the question "is there a god". Some major world religions posit no god (Buddhism, for instance) others a multitude of gods (i.e. Hindu).

The evidence for no gods and for many gods is equally convincing for the evidence for one monotheistic god.

Why should I take this initial supposition on faith? Or maybe, more to the point, HOW can I take this initial supposition on faith? Many world religions do not require it and I reject them out of hand as soon as I make this initial supposition. On what basis do I have an honest right to do this?

**Anonymous**

**2005-07-19 18:10:00**

You can take several aspects of life and use them as valid proof for a belief in God.

Normally, I would creation as the first, but obviously [sic] that won't hold water here.

Take a look at something as basic as a sense of morality. Why does every society of humans have a similar sense of morality. If we truly did evolve from lower animals, what gave us that sense of moral value that is not seen in any other animals?

Very few societies condone murder, incest, theft, etc. Why?

In the animal kingdom animals are routinely killed, and familial breeding practices are common.

These qualities that we have do not aid our survival and in many cases they hamper our survival as we are required to find more difficult routes to attain what we could easily get by killing or stealing.

We have a conscience, or a moral balance because we were created with one.

**tasty**

**2005-07-20 08:00:00**

Let's start with the parts we agree on and work from there.

I agree with you that the existence of morality requires an explanation. I even agree that innate morals, created in us by a divine being, are a possible explanation for the existence of morality. It seems to me that the reasoning is very similar to the idea that creation proves the existence of god. I say the reasonings are similar, because they both consist of observing something complex and seemingly inexplicable and putting forth what seems to be an intuitively obvious answer. The diversity of life and sheer scope of the universe are astounding and stagger the mind. They cry out for an explanation. So does morality. In both cases, for the majority of man's written history, that answer has been supernatural, the work of god, gods or goddesses.

But, I ask you, does your intuition lead you to correct answers, answers that can be trusted to be true without verification? If you simply look at the sky you would think there is one. A sky, I mean. For most of man's history they have assumed that there really is a blue ceiling up there. There isn't. It's an optical illusion. The atmosphere begins, invisibly, at the ground. You can go up and up and up and you'll never reach the "sky" because sitting at your computer reading this, you are in it. Every child's intuitive understanding of this is wrong. Similarly, people's intuitive guess about how televisions, computers, the Internet and even their own bodies work are wrong most of the time. Our intuitive understandings of time and gravity, are wrong. How do we know the earth is round, that air exists, that the moon revolves around the earth? We only know through investigation of the phenomena and a willingness to admit when our intuitive understanding jumped to a conclusion that was unwarranted.

Now, I said all of that because it is key to how I approach this question. I don't trust in myself, my heart, my intuition. The heart is treacherous, who can know it?<sup>139</sup> So, with a question like this I do the following. I place possible explanations out there and I test to see which ones conform best to the evidence observed. Which is the best explanation for what we see?

In the case of morality, there are several possible explanations. First, morality is an innate trait designed and given to us by our creator. Second, morality developed according to evolutionary processes. Third, morality is neither innate nor evolutionary but is a societal convention developed to keep order and structure but is so deeply ingrained in us at an early stage that we feel as if it is innate. Fourth, some combination of the first three



explanations. I could go on. It's not a situation where two options are enough. It is a puzzle and it should be analyzed.

I start by asking questions. First, does morality, altruism, really exist or is "every good deed ultimately selfish"? Does helping others offer a survival advantage or disadvantage in an evolutionary theory? Is there evidence that morality really is innate and not the product of societal pressures or enlightened self-interest? How much variation in moral standards exists not just in the world today but throughout recorded history? Do the answers to these questions suggest a pattern that might help me judge which answer fits the pattern best? Do morals demonstrably exist in the animal kingdom? If so, are they stronger or more evident in species with strong genetic affinity to our own? If not, is there a pattern to them that might suggest something about their cause?

I could go on, but you see my point, I hope. The number of theories about where morality comes from and even what it is are many. Religions provide various explanations and human intuition often agrees with one of them. The social and historical sciences suggest other possible explanations and perhaps a person's intuition agrees with one of those instead. Perhaps none of them are what really happened or perhaps what really happened is unintuitive and we don't agree with it on those grounds. What matters is that a) all theories are on the table and b) all evidence we can get is sought after and c) we don't let our desired result cloud our judgment of the evidence and d) we don't stop inquiring.

I know this is really long, but I had a bus ride to kill. :-) Before I sign off though, the "evolutionary explanation"...

Morality does prove a survival skill in any social situation simply because other people reciprocate behavior that causes them suffering. If you treat others badly, you get kicked out of the group or killed or simply don't get to reproduce, on average. There are, of course, exceptions but "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a definite survival trait. If cooperation is key to the survival and success of an individual in a larger social setting, then there is evolutionary selection pressure for it in even nascent tribal groups. In larger and larger cities it becomes more and more important. Civilization leads to refinement of the moral codes and societal pressures lead to the reproductive success of those who treat their fellows cooperatively.

Now, having not researched the subject in depth (I have been much more interested in the history of religion and in biology than in sociology) I will not say that explanation is correct either. I will spend some time looking into some of the questions I asked earlier though and see where the evidence leads and report back here.

You may think that this is the wrong way to go about this, all Witnesses tend to. They think you start with the Bible and then work from there. In my mind, the Bible is one explanation put forth by one small group of people among billions who have lived. If it is "the explanation", I believe

the evidence of the physical world will confirm that. If it is just the sincere best guesses of the writers, the evidence will often provide alternative explanations that are a better fit.

**Anonymous**

**2005-07-20 12:00:00**

Well since this isn't appropriate anyway, I will end with this though.

I agree with you that we can not throw the blanket of faith over everything and step back and say see, I'm right and your wrong. No one has ever told you that in the first place.

The bible also makes it very clear that we are to investigate our convictions, keep on proving that we are in the truth.

But what you fail to see is the balance, while faith does not cover everything it is required for somethings [sic]. For instance -- God has no beginning. We could never understand that, so we accept it on faith.

We are involved in a trial and we must choose the side that we want to be on, if all the answers were laid out for us then is that a fair trial? Jehovah has given us enough information to make [sic] an informed decision [sic], based on evidence AND faith that he exists and that he is the one true God deserving of our worship.

Creation continues to glorify God, our morality glorifies God, our inborn desires for everlasting life and our complete refusal to accept death as natural all glorify God. These are not things that we evolved, these are things that God gave us as gifts.

God is real, Satan is real, they are both hoping you will take their [sic] side, and those are the only two sides available. Satan would like you to think that there are more, but they are all his.

I hope you find the answers your [sic] looking for.

**tasty**

**2005-07-20 13:03:00**

I appreciate that you came here and at least attempted to discuss this.

There is a lot I could say, but I think my point is already well made.

The only thing I ask of you is that you not think of me in terms of Satanic apostasy. An inability to believe without reason may be consider a personality flaw to you, but it is how I have always been. If reason can't bring me back to Jehovah's Witnesses, I won't be back, because I refuse to be unreasonable or make the claim that I have found the "one True Religion" and that the others are "Babylonish False Religion", when that claim is not able to be backed up by evidence. I consider that to be arrogance, of the highest order and humility and honesty won't let me do that.

If the Organization would just stop claiming that they have the one Truth and that those of us who are unconvinced are to be shunned, that would go a long way towards reasonableness. But, no claim of being the one true religion without reason can be anything I can support and it hurts. Badly.

**Anonymous**

**2005-07-22 14:36:00**

You said : "If the Organization would just stop claiming that they have the one Truth and that those of us who are unconvinced are to be shunned, that would go a long way towards reasonableness."

The organization does not make the claim that there is only one true religion [sic] -- the bible does. Ephesians 4:5 - "one Lord, one faith, one baptism".

If we didn't believe that we have that "one faith" then we would all be on the Ryan bandwagon. So your request is not feasible.

Do we want to shun you? Not at all. Why do we? You know this, but I will indulge anyways. We, including you, chose to dedicate our lives to Jehovah. To serve him and be loyal to him above all others. You have taken the stance to be an enemy of Jehovah, and therefore our loyalty demands that we recognize Jehovah above you.

Just because [sic] you have chosen not to believe in him, does not mean that we do not, nor does it mean that we are less than you because we do. You state that you can not be honest to yourself and serve Jehovah without irrefutable proof of his existence, fine. We all get it. But we can not accept you, as though nothing has changed, and still be honest to our convictions either. That is incompatible.

We do not shun those who do not share our beliefs, we shun those who have chosen to be an enemy to our beliefs. If you had "drifted away", stopped attending meetings and had just gone inactive, I would dare say that most people would have remained close to you and encouraged you, but you had to go and drop a nuclear bomb on everything and then you have the nerve to ask why we don't want to have anything to do with you??

Faith is a delicate thing, and it is not worth taking a baseball bat to it. These days you are that baseball bat. You can not seem to leave the topic alone and if I see you on the streets then I am sure that this conversation will arise, why do I want to go through that, it is easier on me spiritually AND emotionally to cross the other way.

We all love you Ryan, and all this is even more difficult with the loss of Rhett. I am sorry that you feel that belief in God is not an option for you, I am sorry that Jehovah was never real enough to you to keep you from taking this path in life.

Most of all I am sorry that you and I can not get together for dinner, or at a coffee shop and talk about the latest new gadget, or how much we hate that Mac's are going to run on intel, or how the latest song or creative venture your doing is going.

I miss all those things, I miss you. However, as long as you continue to assail my God, you can not be welcome in my life, not matter how much it hurts to shut you out.

**tasty**

**2005-07-23 08:37:00**

First things first. I am not an enemy of your belief system. Reason, logic and critical analysis are simply my tools for understanding life. If reason, logic and critical analysis prove detrimental to your "fragile" faith, then perhaps you need to ask yourself why, if that faith is actually supposed to be based on reality. Reality always stands up to reason, logic and critical analysis. I'm not the enemy of your faith, reality is. I'm just a guy asking how to live in reality. If the questions I ask are ones you cannot answer and if that makes you uncomfortable, that is an unfortunate side effect but you really ought to be able to answer those questions if you plan on basing your life on the beliefs that arise out of them.

Secondly. By what right does a person who spends their time going door to door in an attempt to convince other people that their beliefs are true dare to imply that I have no right to discuss "the topic"? I spent the first 30 years of my life discussing it and you bring it into people's homes on a daily / weekly / monthly basis. How dare you imply that I should have just swallowed my convictions and shut up? What gives you the right to suggest that I should have simply abandoned my search for truth when I found out you didn't have it? I ask for proof from anybody who makes any claim. Jehovah's Witnesses are not special except that I spent so many years among them and my family is still there. If I ask questions on my own website in my own forum that you cannot answer that does NOT make me a nuclear bomb or a baseball bat. You have every right not to be here.

Finally. Your implication that your emotional "faith" gives you a monopoly on truth is truly insulting not just to me but to about 99.9% of the worlds population who think Jehovah's Witnesses are wrong and the 67% of it that think Christianity is wrong. We all have a right, a duty and an obligation to inquire into our belief systems and to verify the truth of them. Not just to "keep convincing ourselves" that we're right, but really ask whether or not we have the right to claim that we are correct.

"If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call into question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it--the life of that man is one long sin against mankind." - William Clifford, 1877

I am quite capable of spending time around people who believe differently than I do (on any subject) without ever mentioning it. I need not discuss "the topic" in general company. But, here, on this page, is my RELIGION BLOG with the subtitle "Don't read this if you don't want to know." This is different. This is my well labeled forum for this topic. It's ridiculous to fear me walking down the street or talking about Macs over coffee. I don't bite, I just disagree and discuss it here, not everywhere. Your fear is unjustified and if I can ask questions that your faith cannot answer, that is really not about you. It's about my inalienable human right to search for answers and your need to look deeper into your beliefs.

You've got answers. You believe them. That doesn't make them true or false, so analysis needs to happen. I say so, it hurts you. That is not my fault and you have no right to fear me or ask me to shut up here in my own forum while you insist on going into the homes of others to convince people that your particular member of the old Canaanite pantheon is actually the real one and the other 70 were the imaginary ones. You evangelize, I write, we both think we're in the right, only one of us is afraid of what the other has to say. I think that speaks volumes.

**Anonymous**  
**2005-07-28 17:11:00**

Ryan... Everything you write on this is all really good. You have challenged everything you have ever learned. But, it is sad that it hasn't brought you closer to Jehovah. We all want you back but the way I feel is that if you really don't believe it then there is no point for you to come back. I love you Ryan. My whole life I have known you and have been close to your whole family. I hope one day you do come to the conclusion that Jehovah is real and that you find that proof you are looking for. I have a question when you went door-to-door the reason we went out was to preach about God's Kingdom, The paradise. Do you still believe that this world will go on forever? And if Armegeddon, that the bible talks about, does come... Will that be enough of a proof to you???

**tasty**  
**2005-08-12 07:40:00**

I agree, it is sad that it hasn't brought me to Jehovah. It's sad because his followers then feel they have to treat me like a dangerous person. It's sad because some of those followers are people I love very very very much, people I need in my life now that my brother is dead, people I would die for.

Sadder still, is the wasted potential of beautiful, talented and valuable human beings who dedicate their lives to myths of the supernatural and promises of deliverance based on human inventions. How sad to spend your life dedicated to a paradise that isn't coming. How sad to raise your children to fear "worldly" people and to hope for Armageddon.

There is not one part of this whole scenario that isn't sad. If it were true, and I didn't want to be part of it, that would be sad in the way you meant.

But, it's not true, so I CAN'T be part of it and instead it's sad for all these other reasons.

Would I believe in Jehovah if he brought about Armageddon and all that? Yes. A real, honest to goodness act of god would convince me. It's not a desire not to believe, it's a frustrated desire to believe on evidence.

### **Anonymous**

**2005-08-15 22:54:00**

Ryan, I just came across your Blog. I am a JW. It appears that you might be disfellowshipped or disassociated. Not really sure but it doesn't matter.

My brother is disfellowshipped. I love him very much. I don't know you or what happened to your brother but I know what it's like to lose someone very close to you, someone that you love.

There is nothing I can say or anyone at this point to prove anything about Jehovah to you. If you truly are confused about Jehovah and whether or not Jehovah's Witnesses is the true religion there is only one way to find out.

Prayer.

Pray to God. Whomever you think him to be. Ask him for an answer. Ask him to lead you to him. That is the only way. If ANY creator exists, and if you pray to find him, he will make himself known to you. If you are honest with yourself, and if in your heart you are truly searching and not merely interested in a display of words here on your blog, you will find everything you are looking for.<sup>140</sup>

### **Faith**

**Tue, 19 Jul 2005 16:31:54 +0000**

I just don't understand faith.

The Bible talks about faith, every religion talks about faith, every holy book requires faith. They can't all be right. If faith is the criteria to use, they all are correct to somebody.

There must be a tie-breaker.

There must be a differentiator.

Miracles? No good, all religions claim miracles.

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<sup>140</sup> This comment was responded to in a blog post upcoming called "Comments on Comments"

Tradition? No good, all religions have tradition.

Claims to be The Truth? There are just too many making that claim.

Antiquity? Number of adherents?

What can possibly be the tie-breaker?

If I am asked to select which of the following is real:

- a) The Loch Ness Monster
- b) Bigfoot
- c) Alien Abductions
- d) Unicorns
- e) Leprechauns
- f) Chupacabra

My response would be "I do not believe that any of them is real". If I was told that I would have to believe in the aliens because prophecies written long ago predicted that the aliens would destroy the earth in my lifetime, but I had never seen an alien and the prophecies were clearly open to interpretation, I could not get myself to believe it without evidence.

When somebody tells me that the bronze-age tribal god of a small band of desert dwelling people, whom all evidence indicates was simply adopted from an earlier pantheon of 70 other gods I don't believe in, is about to bring the world to an end it has exactly the same validity to it as the alien story.

For me to say I do not believe this is not an affront to this god or to his believers. It's simply me exercising the right not to believe something for which no evidence has been given me.

You are not under any obligation to believe in aliens, unless you see one, get on their spaceship and verify it for yourself. If the evidence for two things are of an equal nature and neither one admits of any proof, I am at a loss to see how a person can choose between the two.

So, I stand by my earlier post about what I need to see in order to come back to worshipping this deity or being a member of his organization.

I don't believe because I can see no compelling reason to reject 1000+ gods as false and accept one as true if the basis for the decision is identical in both cases. If somebody else makes the choice to believe, that is their right, but they cannot compel me to do the same or expect me to consider their choice a rational one.

Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that faith is right about the existence of a particular god. That means that for billions of other people, 67% of the worlds population who do not worship Jehovah, faith is wrong. Can something that is obviously wrong 2 out of 3 times be trusted to be right the third time?

Why?

Can somebody explain faith as anything other than emotional self-justification?

**Shawn**

**2005-07-20 17:25:00**

Hey Ryan, what's up man. Great blog. You obviously have/are doing a lot of thinking about religion, God, Jesus, etc. That's good, very good. I have too.

Faith? Hmmmm. I have lots of faith, even after going through the same exact things you seem to be going through, religiously speaking.

I have faith in humanity, generally speaking.

I have faith in my wife.

I have faith in my children.

I have faith that both of their futures will be bright ones.

I have faith that tomorrow will come. I can't be sure it will, but probability hints toward it, so I believe in tomorrow without an ounce of actual proof it will be here.

Etc.



I think you framing your entire religious search around ideas and concepts of G-d, religion, and humanity that you rightfully disagree with. However, that doesn't mean there aren't ideas and concepts of G-d, religion, and humanity "out there" worth finding and dedicating oneself to. One can't do that, however, if one is still trying to prove those he has already disagreed with to be wrong.

Does that make sense?

Also, I wouldn't put all my eggs in science and rationality just yet. Yes, the two are beyond important for 21st century humanity, but they don't have all the answers or direction a healthy humanity needs.

Again, excellent blog. Keep up the good work.

**tasty**

**2005-07-20 17:35:00**

Hey,

Thanks for the post.

I am, usually, in my normal life, not all that hung up on the beliefs of the system I left. I have the same types of faith you mentioned in your post, I meditate, attend a UU congregation sporadically and devote myself to positive things.

The death of my brother sort of brought up some things though. At his funeral I was confronted with a lot of people I love who have a wall between themselves and myself because of their religious convictions. I was encouraged by many to "come back" to the organization and I simply have to wonder how they expect me to do that if they are unable to even differentiate their system of belief from anybody else's. This whole Faith and "I Will Come Back To Jehovah's Witnesses If..." posting is basically to illustrate that I cannot come back.

Fortunately, I have new positive things in my life. It just hurts that all the people I have ever known and loved think they cannot be a part of my life anymore simply because of their faith.

Faith is fine when it doesn't hurt other people. Their's does. It hurts me, it hurts them, it hurts a lot of other former Jehovah's Witnesses, so I feel the need to point that out. It was the only thing that could have possibly made the death of my dearest friend worse, and there it was, so I wrote.

I will definitely keep moving on with my life, however, with a view towards what I have, not towards what I've lost.

Thanks again for writing...

**Shawn**

**2005-07-20 17:51:00**

*Fortunately, I have new positive things in my life. It just hurts that all the people I have ever known and loved think they cannot be a part of my life anymore simply because of their faith.*

I hear you man. A faith that causes division between loved ones over the acceptance/refusal of a catalogued list of beliefs is not a "faith" at all. It is a "test."

People are always more important than beliefs, and that goes both ways.

Anyone who claims otherwise has unfortunately embraced the wrong aspects of religion. "Religion was made for man, man wasn't made for religion," to conceptually paraphrase one of the greatest prophets of Jehovah's Witnesses.

**Anonymous**  
**2005-08-15 22:34:00**

Ryan, were you ever baptized? I'm just wondering what happened to you. Regardless of the whole JW thing, I sense a lot anger. Why? Is it because of the death of your brother?<sup>141</sup>

**I'm Not Asking for Too Much**  
**Mon, 25 Jul 2005 13:51:00 +0000**

It has been suggested that what I am asking for in asking for proof of the statements made by religious adherents is wrong and against faith.

I would simply like to share who it was that taught me that these were the correct standards of logic and reason to adhere to.

That would be the Theocratic Ministry School. For those unfamiliar with the TMS, it is the in-congregation ministerial training program conducted by Jehovah's Witnesses. I was enroleld at a very young age, around 5 or 6. It is a school in which talks are assigned and graded by the Theocratic Ministry School overseer. Every Witness is familiar with this arrangement and with the book that is used as a guide to the grading, the Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook.

The Guidebook has a section in it entitled "Study 31: Convince Your Audience, Reason With Them" and it is where I was originally taught at a very young age how to honestly reason.

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<sup>141</sup> This comment is addressed in a separate blog post a little further on

Here is the most relevant section, I think, typed in from my 1971 copy of the Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook, page 155, paragraphs 7-12:

7. Sound Proof Given. A matter is not "proved" simply because you, as the speaker, believe it or state it. You must always remember that your audience is fully justified in asking, "Why is that true?" or, "Why do you say that is so?" As the speaker you always have the obligation of being able to answer the question "Why?"

8. The questions "How?" "Who?" "Where?" "When?" "What?" produce only facts and information in reply, but the question "Why?" produces reasons. It stands alone in this regard and demands more of you than just facts. It taxes your thinking ability. Because of this, in preparing your talk, ask yourself that same question repeatedly: "Why?" Then be certain that you can supply the answers.

9. As reasons for statements you make you can often quote someone who is accepted as an authority. That simply means that if he said it, it must be true because he is recognized as one who knows. That makes it reason enough for believing it. The supreme Authority in this field is, of course, Jehovah God. Therefore, quoting a text from the Bible in support is evidence enough to prove a point. This is called "testimonial" evidence because it consists of "testimony" from an acceptable witness.

10. In producing testimonial evidence you must be certain that your witness will be acceptable to your audience. If you use human authorities, be sure of their background and how they will be viewed. Many persons will accept the Bible as Divine Authority, but some view it as man's work and therefore not absolute in authority. In such cases you might have to resort to other evidences or perhaps establish the authenticity of the Bible first.

11. A word of caution. All evidence must be used honestly. Do not take a quotation out of context. Make certain that what you say is exactly what the authority you are quoting had in mind to say. Be specific in your references. Be careful of statistics too. Improperly presented, these can boomerang with devastating results. Remember the man who could not swim and who drowned in a stream that averaged only three feet in depth. He forgot about the ten-foot hole in the middle.

12. Circumstantial evidence is that other than human testimony or divine authority. It is evidence that is based on inferences from facts rather than quotations of witnesses. In order to establish your conclusions and make circumstantial evidence convincing, you must have a sufficient array of facts and arguments in support of your conclusions.

This is all relatively decent advice. Especially the bit about how to properly use a quotation.

So, if I ask you to back up your claims and arguments and say "no fallacies, no quotes out of context" I'm asking for no more than your Theocratic Ministry School overseer is supposed to ask of you.

This is the nub of what made me leave. They taught me how to be an honest reasoner than broke the rules themselves in their publications. I couldn't remain an honest reasoner and still promote their dishonest reasoning. I didn't make this up to be rebellious. This is what I was taught folks...

### **Comments on Comments**

**Tue, 16 Aug 2005 14:29:00 +0000**

Every once in a while, comments are put on this website that require an answer on the front page. This is, I think, one of those times. You see, there are a lot of anonymous posts that happen here from my former brothers and sisters in the Watchtower Organization that seem to indicate that they believe that I am either a) angry over something bad that happened to me in the congregation, b) somebody who was never a real believer in the first place, c) estranged from Jehovah due to lack of prayer / study / desire or d) missing the point of faith by performing all the critical analysis I do here on this blog. I feel it is relevant to the purpose of this blog to answer their questions in a way the might provide answers to anybody else who finds themselves wondering the same things. For example, there is the following comment:

*Ryan, were you ever baptized? I'm just wondering what happened to you. Regardless of the whole JW thing, I sense a lot anger. Why? Is it because of the death of your brother?*

I'd like to take the opportunity here to answer these questions. First, was I ever baptized? Yes. I was baptized in July of 1989 at a District Convention in Rochester MN. I had been raised a Witness since I was born in 1973 and was a member of the Theocratic Ministry School since age 5. I loved it as a kid and I loved it at the time I got baptized and until 2004 when I chose to leave because I felt it was the only intellectually honest route available to me. I still miss the congregation, the friends and the comforting feeling that I had a known hope for the future and a relationship with God.

Now, onto the remaining question(s). Am I angry? Yep. Absolutely and it is probably impossible to separate it from the JW situation but it is not because of the death of my brother. That is a very recent event and makes me incredibly sad and lonely and sick to my stomach, but not angry. I've never loved and looked up to anybody in the world more than Rhett. He was my best friend, life-long creative partner, role model and the best person I've ever known. He was my pioneer partner and a lover of Jehovah with his whole soul who still accepted my situation with grace and aplomb and never treated me differently despite the differences in beliefs. We showed each other the mutual respect of not judging each other for the difference. He was also a wonderful father of a beautiful son and loving husband to a beautiful wife. The world lost one of it's most loving, gifted and magnificent people when his heart stopped beating on the 4th of July this year and I console myself with the happy knowledge that I was the luckiest person on earth where he was concerned because I knew him longer and better than anybody else. It was difficult being treated poorly by some of the JW's at his funeral but I am not angry at them either because I know they feel they have to do what they did. At the funeral another former-Witness friend of mine in attendance was mad at them and I said, "Those people in there love us, they've just been instructed in a strange way of showing it." Besides, most of the 1000+ JW's there that day treated me with love and sympathy. So, why the anger?

I am angry on behalf of friends, family and loved ones in and out of the organization who are suffering because they either a) don't believe (in either the Society or Jehovah) but have to pretend they do to avoid destroying their lives, b) believe and have to cut off those they love who do not or c) don't believe and say so and lose everything. I am in category C but my father and remaining brother and sister are in B and I am aware of many who I love in category A. Devout believers in Jehovah and Jesus who left the organization

because they did not believe it was really the representative of said persons hurt. Skeptics like myself who thought we had reasons to believe and discovered they were dishonest rationalizations hurt. Believers who lose those of us who don't agree hurt. Everybody hurts, nobody wins, and I can do little or nothing about it. That makes me angry because people I love suffer.

I am also angry because I firmly believe in the honesty and integrity espoused by the Organization and because they break those rules of honesty and integrity in their own publications. To read in the Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook about how to use honest reasoning or to read in the Awake! about the importance of avoiding fallacies makes one particular upset when they find dishonest reasoning and fallacies in the Reasoning book, the Creation book, the God's Word book and other publications. To spend 25 years of your life telling people how different your beliefs are, how they are based on reason, only to discover one day that they are simply blind faith, is a deep personal betrayal, a shocking painful thing to go through. To find, further, that no believers are able to answer your questions and that they consider your painful discovery to be willful rebellion is a further injury. I'm not angry at the individuals in the organization but I am angry that I was taught a falsehood, also taught the standards to detect a falsehood and then treated as a faulty person for applying those standards to those who taught me. That is hypocrisy and I believe I have a right to be angry at hypocrites making rules that have demolished my life.

I am angry that Witnesses claim some sort of monopoly on a book (the Bible) that was not written for them, by them or about them. That the authors and audience for the book are studiously ignored by the Organization and it's real meaning is lost in their interpretation. There is beauty and value in knowing the Bible for what it really says and what that tells us about people and times long past, without us in the modern day twisting its words around to pretend it's about us. That disrespects and devalues the actual book and the actual story it actually tells and the reality it actually reflects. As somebody who regularly reads and studies and cares deeply about the Bible, that makes me angry. The Bible is used to unite and guide the Organization but at the same time all the modern discoveries about it, where it really came from and what archaeology can tell us about what it actually means, are ignored by a group with an agenda they have constructed around it. Shame on them for treating the sacred wisdom of another culture in such a shoddy manner. That makes me angry. The Bible doesn't belong only to believers and literalists who read

the words but miss what they actually say about the people who authored them. I don't need to think the Bible is entirely true or divinely inspired to think it's worth studying. When archaeology reveals the truth about it, I prefer that and find it fascinating.

I am angry that my son will not ever be close to his grandfather because of religion.

I am angry that people keep presuming that I didn't pray enough or have enough faith while ignoring the very real issues I state in black and white here on this blog. Speaking of which, this brings me to the other comment I want to comment on...

*Ryan, I just came across your Blog. I am a JW. It appears that you might be disfellowshipped or disassociated. Not really sure but it doesn't matter.*

*My brother is disfellowshipped. I love him very much. I don't know you or what happened to your brother but I know what it's like to lose someone very close to you, someone that you love.*

*There is nothing I can say or anyone at this point to prove anything about Jehovah to you. If you truly are confused about Jehovah and whether or not Jehovah's Witnesses is the true religion there is only one way to find out.*

*Prayer.*

*Pray to God. Whomever you think him to be. Ask him for an answer. Ask him to lead you to him. That is the only way. If ANY creator exists, and if you pray to find him, he will make himself known to you. If you are honest with yourself, and if in your heart you are truly searching and not merely interested in a display of words here on your blog, you will find everything you are looking for.*

Prayer. Implicit in this statement is the assumption that I did not pray or that prayer can deal with the issues I have. First, I used to pray all the time. Fervently. I felt the "relationship" with God when I did too sometimes. I still keep open the hope that there is something greater to connect with, maybe even someone. However, let me be blunt. There is a major technical obstacle here. Even if I felt in my heart of hearts that I had a relationship with God, I

would not be able to accept that the God I was connected to was the Judeo-Christian one without the issues I have addressed being answered. Furthermore, I could not be a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and teach other people about creationism, the Flood, the Tower of Babel and the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts without hypocrisy on the basis of that faith because I know the truth about these things. Creationism is false. It is a lie. A desperate lie. There was a flood of some sort, probably multiple floods, but no global deluge. That is a myth. The Tower of Babel story, myth. 607? Wrong date, it was 587. The Gospels? Definitely not history, likely entirely myth. I could go on but my point is simply this: I know these things are false and it's not an opinion matter, I know exactly why they are false. I have seen the contradictory evidence and also the positive evidence that supports the alternate explanations. I am aware of the internal contradictions and impossibilities and the weaknesses of the apologists arguments that attempt to rationalize these things. Prayer could possibly get me to place where I believed in something, but not something that's simply not true. Prayer might make you feel there was a god, but evidence is required to figure out which one of the thousands of god's on earth that one is or whether you are simply talking to yourself. Evidence does not do well for the Bible literalist view of things and I could never accept that view on current evidence because it is demonstrably false. I don't know if there is a god somewhere, but I do know that if there is the Bible gives no more of an obviously valid path to him/her/it than any other book that makes the claim. As such, even if I ever believe internally in god again, it is up to the various witnesses of the various gods to tell me why theirs is that true god. If you can't put up that information, then you a) have no right to judge me and b) really need to ask yourself if what you are doing is really right.

The first person of any faith to offer any sort of evidence that their god is true that can withstand critical scrutiny will have my full attention and interest.

So, that might tell you enough about me. I hope it does. Until next time....

But there wasn't a next time for a very long time.

After losing my religion, then my wife, then my friends, then my family, then Arn, Rob, Grandma Weisbrich, and finally Rhett, after arguments, essays, fights, tears, and all the drama I could take, I gave up. I let go. I stopped fighting. After a year and a half in which my life had been leveled down to it's



foundations, I was out of strength to try to put it back together anymore. I couldn't go back and I was too tired to go forward.

I had taken time off of work when Rhett died. A few weeks later I had attempted to return to the office but I found I couldn't focus or get anything done so I left again. It was now August and I had been out of work for a month. I had some money in the bank, enough to survive three months. I decided to take that time to try to learn a new programming language and write a piece of software for myself that I might sell directly over the Internet. My progress was, as could be expected, very slow.

Mostly I got up in the morning, went to coffee shops, and sat around depressed. I moved out of my apartment and in with Esther to lower expenses. For some reason I couldn't figure out at the time, she took my situation in hand and was long suffering and patient with me as fall changed to winter and still I made no money and showed no interest in my life. Turns out it was love.

By mid-winter I was broke and Es was basically supporting me. I had pawned my instruments and sold some others. I gained weight and even though I knew my life was a mess, I didn't want it to improve. I just wanted it to end. My friend Chad and his wife split around the turn of the year and Chad asked if he could crash at Esther's place as well. She was too nice to turn him away, but the situation in her tiny apartment soon began to be ridiculous. Chad wasn't working either, or contributing to the house. Es was supporting her depressed boyfriend and his half-time kid as well as his often drunk friend and she barely made enough money for herself.

The smart thing for her to have done would have been to kick us all out on our asses, but she didn't. Again, I think love might have come into play there.

For myself, Chad became as much a symbol as a person. I had kicked him out of my apartment in 1993 because he wasn't living as a Jehovah's Witness anymore and he had headed west into a life of drugs and violence. Now here he was and I felt he was the only brother that remained to me and I couldn't let him go.

As the new year turned and my financial situation got more and more desperate, as well as my situation with Esther and Chad in the house, I polished up my resume and started looking for work again. I had written my software and put it up for sale on the Internet but sales hadn't been forthcoming. I had to go back to work. In early 2006, I found a new contract and was once again employed but still had no idea what to do about Chad. Esther wanted him to go, I wanted him to stay, and he was, if anything, as miserable and depressed as I was so if he had gone who knows what would have happened to him?

So Chad and I decided to move out of Esther's place and into an apartment across the street from her. Esther was, understandably, furious that I was moving out of her apartment. Why didn't I just kick Chad out? I thought she would be mollified by the fact that I would still be living across the street but she was angry. Earlier on in our dating life, I had invited her to live with me once and then after a few months had a freak out and asked her to find her own place again because I wasn't ready for cohabitation. It had almost broken us up. The Chad situation nearly did as well.

When Chad and I moved into the new apartment, a shabby little thing located above an auto parts store, we became a kind of Ozzie and Harriet. I made the money, he cleaned the house and cooked. I tried to get him to get a job, but honestly I was again making enough to cover all the expenses and I didn't much care if he had one. I just wanted him around.

Tabithah, on the other hand, did not. When she found out that Chad and I were roommates and Syd was there, she went ballistic. She had previously had a bad drunken experience with Chad which both he, she and I have remarkably different recollections of. Suffice it to say, in her view, Chad was not somebody she wanted around her child and as co-legal guardian along with me, she had some say in the matter. Chad took it remarkably well when I explained that I couldn't have him living with me without risking my custody situation with my kid or at the very least running up a lot of legal bills I couldn't afford. Strangely enough, his wife decided to take him back, within months she was pregnant, and now they're expecting their second child.

After Chad was gone you might think that Esther and I would get back to normal but I had a strong urge to get away from everything that reminded me of the last few years, to start over from scratch. Esther's was the voice on the phone that told me my brother was dead, she was the listening ear for hundreds of conversations about my family, my religion and the pain of it all. She had stayed there, faithfully, by my side through sickness, health, wealth and poverty, and yet I couldn't accept her. I still couldn't accept my new life, I couldn't accept this remarkable person, I didn't even want to. I wanted to be a lone wolf and soon, Esther and I broke up.

When we broke up, Esther was devastated, I was numb. I wasn't thinking of it in terms of losing Esther, I was thinking of it in terms of "do I want to be attached to another person or not?" This was a purely theoretical "other person", not Esther specifically. I had convinced myself that it was a choice between attachment to somebody or non-attachment, a solo life, not even really about Esther per se. I even figured that if I changed my mind she would be right there, across the street. I could just go and explain to her that "listen here, I've decided, I can be attached to somebody else so I guess we can get back together".

She, on the other hand, was crushed and was sure that we were through. She took a road trip to Texas to see her brother Seth, crying most of the way across the country. When she returned a week later she had made a decision to make one last effort to keep me in her life. Why she did it, trying to hold on to a guy who kept trying to get rid of her and spent most of his time being suicidally depressed I didn't understand at the time. Must have been love.

When she suggested we try one more time a small part of me thought, yeah, I guess that might be slightly better than being a lone wolf, at least I still have my own apartment, and I agreed. I was still numb but I was slowly realizing that she and Syd and I were a great family when we were together. In my apartment in Hastings, above the auto parts store, I started to feel like my new life belonged to me, just a little, and that I wanted it, even if just a little.

## **General Update**

**Thu, 15 Jun 2006 15:57:00 +0000**

I'm working for Oracle Retail/Retek now. Very exciting. Living in Hastings. Also very exciting. I need to blog more. This is a post intended to indicate that I intend to get back to writing again. Write on...

The first anniversary of Rhett's death was drawing near. It had been over two years since I had deconverted from the Witnesses. I needed some sort of tools to deal with my mind. I had read about Buddhism and I decided to try it out, to see if it could help.

### **misc ramblings**

**Mon, 26 Jun 2006 17:27:00 +0000**

Three weeks ago I started my latest contracting job doing Java 2 Enterprise Edition, working for the Oracle Retail division of Oracle. Today was my first day in the new Oracle Center offices downtown. I got a new cubicle and phone. It's really odd to think of myself as this guy, this professional guy working for Oracle and writing price management software. When I leave the office I immediately forget that I was there for the day.

When I woke up this morning, I was deep into a bunch of strange dreams. I don't remember the dreams, but I remember smiling and pondering them in my half-awake/half-asleep state. I did what I usually do in the morning, I grabbed my iBook, fired up iTunes and updated my podcasts for the day. I plugged my SLVR into my iBook and copied the new podcasts to my phone for listening throughout the day. I took a shower, brushed my teeth and got dressed in a pair of jeans and a "Let It Be" t-shirt while these things were taking place. Then I got in my car, drove to the park n' ride and took the bus to work.

On the way to work I suddenly felt fairly disconnected from myself. My head was fuzzy and I decided to meditate. So, while cruising along through rush hour traffic I was staring at the floor, focusing on my breath, labeling thoughts that arose in my head, trying to find the still-small-I. I felt like I wasn't making much progress. My head felt like soup. When I finished, however, and stretched and re-connected with the bus, I could feel that I had taken myself somewhere. I had definitely been in another part of my head, so I guess it worked.

Today at work involved telephone training, removing an obsolete Linux partition from my PC, listening to podcasts, examining source code, a meeting

or two, eating a bagel and a couple of old-fashioned blueberry donuts, and discovering a walk-up sushi bar in the skyway. Now I'm heading home and I think tonight will involve making spring rolls, watching "Diary of a Madman" with Vincent Price and snuggling with Es.

And that's the life I lead today.

## **Buddhism Diary**

**Tue, 11 Jul 2006 14:55:32 +0000**

I'm not sure if I'm a Buddhist. At one point, I was fairly certain that I was one because I understood it intellectually and agreed with it. Reading texts like the Dhammapada filled me with a sense of serenity and understanding. Reading about Buddhism, reading descriptions of it's philosophical underpinnings, it's goals, it's history, intrigued me and caused me to consider myself a Buddhist, if only intellectually.

The odd thing about it is, I didn't *practice*. I didn't meditate, except that one time at the meditation class. I didn't listen to Buddhist talks, read Buddhist texts, think Buddhist thoughts. I was more a Buddhism Bystander.

The process of attempting to recover from the death of my brother this last year has been extremely difficult. I have had emotional states that range from suicidal to blissful to numb to violent, sometimes all before I got out of bed in the morning. I was damaging my relationships, and myself, on a daily basis. Then, more out of desperation than anything, I decided to give Buddhism a try. By "a try", I mean, I began listening to talks by Buddhist teachers, reading some books and attempting meditation. The first time I really tried to meditate by myself I felt way out of my depth and I wasn't sure at all that I had just done anything at all. The second time I felt the same way for about seven minutes and then I noticed a change in my thought patterns, a sort of odd cessation of noise in my head. I had a 10-minute meditation timer going and out of the 10-minutes, this experience lasted for all of 30 seconds, after which I was back to wrestling with myself. When I stood up again and thought about what had just happened, I came to a couple of realizations about some things I had heard in a talk the day before. The experience was fairly trivial, 30 seconds of quiet and a few new glints of perspective, but I found that I was absolutely filled with happiness as a result. For the better part of the last several years I

had felt that I was at the mercy of my mind, that my feelings and thoughts were sort of flinging me around. I had been looking for a tool to help me maneuver my mind, or at least find the part of it that felt most like me. Here, with this little nudge brought on by a meditation experience, was some evidence that this might actually work to do it.

Over the next few days I meditated again and again and each time I made some new observation about myself, some slight realization or alteration in my viewpoint. I listened to more talks and read more. Then one day I was camping with Esther and we got in an argument.

Emotions have been very difficult for me to navigate these last few years (and for most of my life, to be honest) and this was no exception. I got angry, even throwing my walking stick across the campsite. Then, for a couple of seconds, I saw myself. Not like an out of body experience, but a part of me internally stepped back and looked at what I was doing, how I was feeling. I remembered that I had a choice, that I was creating more anger by responding to my initial anger. I saw what was happening, not as "justified" or "unjustified", but as optional. I could choose, instantly, to not be angry, to not continue this. It felt like meditation and as suddenly as I recognized the choice, it was made. The anger went away and a new course became clear in the conversation. I didn't swallow the anger down, I chose not to have it. The ability to see that it was possible to do that stemmed directly from meditation experience.

I was, to put it bluntly, amazed. Esther was too. At that moment I did not feel like a new man, but I felt like I had just had a very strong first-hand experience that the practice of meditation absolutely creates changes, even if it feels like "doing nothing". I have been experiencing new things in this ever since.

I still don't know if I'm actually an honest to goodness Buddhist, but they sure know what they're doing. I'll tell you that...

The experience at the camp ground turned out to be pivotal. In short order, Esther and I started to have a real connection again. I started to care about my life again and asked her to move in and then asked her to marry me. She said yes and we set a date, September 25th, the two year anniversary of our first date. We started house shopping and before I knew it, normal life had broken out.

**Fri, 25 Aug 2006 18:48:24 +0000**

Picked up Syd at Harshas. Showed him the house in Apple Valley that we are planning to move to, which he thought was pretty cool. Syd got quite excited about being by Valley Middle School where Trent and Augusta and Paris would be next year. He mentioned that he thought he was going to Anthony Middle School next year and I told him that was currently being discussed by his mother and I. Had family dinner. He earned \$4 towards his Xbox by getting all his nightly chores properly done.

**Sat, 26 Aug 2006 18:47:49 +0000**

Syd was a little sick and sniffly today. Gave him some cold medicine and he got emotional and a little spaced out. Brought him for a haircut and his bangs were cut shorter than he wanted. He was upset because it wasn't "anime" enough. He had a good day eventually, getting his chores done and getting plenty of rest.

**Sun, 27 Aug 2006 18:46:55 +0000**

Ahhh, sunday. Syd got over the haircut disappointment rather quickly and also seemed to be feeling a bit better. I took Syd out to the ballpark to play baseball. We worked on his throw (I had him try throwing a little more sidearm to try to cure him of his Rhett-style elbow leading tendencies, but that was worse). I also helped him with his batting stance and control. He was whacking the ball around pretty good by the end of it. We both wore ourselves out chasing each other around the bases. Good times.

Family dinner and a family watching of Toy Story 2, then he got his chores done for the day and earned some more towards his Xbox.

**Mon, 28 Aug 2006 18:46:19 +0000**

Dropped Syd off at Bill and Edna's this morning. Made sure he had his phone with and charged on the new car charger. After work, picked him up and looked at possible houses to purchase with Syd and Es. We only did drive-by viewings, but the house at 909 Whitney looks promising. Dinner, chores, the

usual routine. It's a monday after all. Syd is reading a Pokemon book right now and nearly done with it. He mentioned that he wants some new Yu-Gi-Oh cards and we discussed that he could buy them with his Thursday night "fun money" if he wants to.

**Tue, 29 Aug 2006 18:45:45 +0000**

Nothing much to report. Syd went to the Harsha's for the day, family had a quiet night at home. He came up a dollar short towards his Xbox because he didn't get everything done by bedtime, but other than that it was all good.

**Wed, 30 Aug 2006 17:32:05 +0000**

Syd shot a bunch of video tonight. He wants to make the Sydney Sutter show. I'm going to show him how to import it on the computer, edit it and make a DVD. Sounds like a good time. Tonight was supposed to be the Ice Cream Social at Anthony Middle School. We couldn't make it because of a home showing at 909 Whitney so I called Steve Kodoluboy and scheduled a meeting with him for tomorrow at noon. The house was fantastic. We all loved it. We hope to move quickly to purchase it. It seems perfect for Syd. Lots of stuff going on. Syd kept up his reading and chores for the night.

**Thu, 31 Aug 2006 17:29:49 +0000**

After work we met Byron and put together an offer for the house. We might know tomorrow if the buyers accept it. If they do, we might be able to close as soon as the 15th. Woohoo!!

Family fun night tonight. Went to Old Piper Inn. Syd bought "bling" from the vending machine. Then off to Walmart where he got the Yu-Gi-Oh cards he wanted. He showed Es and I how cool his new cards were. Good times.

Our offer on the first house was rejected. No matter, though, as we found another house we liked even more as September began and our offer was accepted. We closed on the afternoon of September 25th and got married at the courthouse down the street that evening in a small ceremony attended by Esther's family, my mom and sister Jasmine, Syd, and Chad Leighton. Afterwards we all went out for Chinese food and then changed into casual clothes and unloaded our U-Haul into our new house. That first night, as Es and I slept together as husband and wife under the ceiling of the very first home either of us had ever owned, I knew I had finally landed. I lost one

family, but I still had one of my own. I lost a religion, but I found myself. I lost my past, but found my future. Hira-hira indeed.